NEW BUDDHIST MOVEMENTS IN THAILAND

Towards an understanding of Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke

Rory Mackenzie

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NEW BUDDHIST MOVEMENTS IN THAILAND

This book examines two new Buddhist movements in Thailand, namely the Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke. These movements represent two distinctive trends within contemporary Buddhism in Thailand. Vastly different in belief and practice, they emerged in Thailand in the 1970s at a time of political uncertainty, social change and increasing dissatisfaction with the Thai Saṅgha and its leadership.

Rory Mackenzie explains why these movements have come into being, what they have reacted against and what they offer to their members. The Wat Phra Dhammakāya tradition views itself as a large, modern movement structured for growth, convenience and efficiency. It has spread to eleven different countries and Westerners are increasingly being attracted to the movement through the practice of Dhammakāya meditation. The author argues that there is some justification in describing this highly progressive movement as fundamentalist and millenarian due to their strong focus on meditation, and the belief that some members have in their leader a saviour figure. Santi Asoke members view the communities in which they live as places where they experience justice and support for living morally upright lives. They also view their communities as a locus for their liberation from suffering. The author suggests that Santi Asoke may best be described as an ascetic/prophetic, utopian movement with legalistic tendencies.

This book should appeal to those interested in Buddhism's confrontation with modernity, and its responses to evolving social issues in Thailand, as well as to those interested in new religions in the broader context of religious studies.

Rory Mackenzie teaches Buddhism and Practical Theology at the International Christian College, Glasgow. He has lived in Thailand for eleven years, is involved in the Thai community in Edinburgh and makes regular visits back to Thailand.

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TO ROSALYN, BEST FRIEND AND FELLOW TRAVELLER FOR 30 YEARS, AND BECCA, JO AND MI-MI WHO JOINED US ON THE JOURNEY

CONTENTS

PREFACE

An Introduction to *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand: Towards an Understanding of Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke.*

This book seeks an understanding of two new Buddhist movements which emerged in Thailand in the 1970s. Vastly different in belief and practice, they developed in a time of political uncertainty, social change and increasing dissatisfaction with the Thai *Saṅgha* and its leadership.

I have sought both insiders' (*emic*) and outsiders' (*etic*) understandings of the movements. Members of both movements view their respective leaders as having qualities of *amnāt* (power), *ittipon* (influence) and *pāramī* (moral stature or charisma). In addition, they are confident in the veracity of their models of spiritual purification. Wat Phra Dhammakāya views itself as a large, modern movement structured for growth, convenience and efficiency. It communicates effectively with its members throughout the world via its satellite TV channel. The movement plans shortly to host 1 million attendees at its temple for special meetings geared towards world peace. The writer sees some justification in describing this highly progressive movement as fundamentalist and millenarian due to its strong focus on meditation, and the belief that some members have in their leader a saviour figure.

Santi Asoke members view the communities in which they live as places where they experience justice and support for living morally upright lives. This is in contrast to their experience in mainstream Thai society. They also view their communities as a locus for liberation from suffering.

Despite their strict, 'peasant' image, Santi Asoke are considerably less of a fundamentalist movement than Wat Phra Dhammakāya. Asoke members view their leader as a highly skillful teacher but not a saviour, thus they cannot be considered millenarian. I have highlighted similarities between Santi Asoke and the Catholic 'base community' movement, as well as the Thai 'community culture' school of thought. Despite some similarities in these areas, I suggest that Santi Asoke may best be described as an ascetic/prophetic, utopian movement with legalistic tendencies.

This thesis suggests that the continuing 'well-being' of Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke indicate both a disenchantment with traditional expressions of mainstream Thai Buddhism and a desire for Buddhist solutions for contemporary living. While Buddhism continues to inform the Thai psyche, the state regulated *Saṅgha* no longer has the credibility and status which it once enjoyed. It will not, therefore, be the 'legitimising' tool in the hands of the Thai government that it traditionally has been.

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This is the publication of my doctoral thesis, along with a few updates. Research students have supervisors and I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Peter Harvey, for his help during my years as a part-time research student. Despite a very busy schedule he read through several drafts of the thesis and supplied me with helpful information. I have greatly benefited from his comments and attention to detail. A thesis has examiners and I appreciate the constructive comments made by my external examiner, Professor Ian Harris.

There are several people I would like to thank at the institute where I teach, the International Christian College, Glasgow. The vice-principal ensured there was adequate time set aside for my research, both in terms of sabbaticals and annual study leave. The librarians were extremely efficient in obtaining inter-library loans for my work, and patient with me at the end of the project when I misplaced some publication details! Dr John Jeacocke was always very helpful when I ran into computing challenges or needed advice regarding the production of the manuscript.

I am grateful to those at Santi Asoke who welcomed me as an 'outsider' and helped me to think like an 'insider'. Two of my mentors at the 2001 *Putta Pisek* ceremony (rigorous yearly training camp) made sure I was not simply an observer but a participant! I learnt a lot from this intensive involvement. Most of the questionnaires completed by the Santi Asoke members were translated into English by Bee Yacam. She also translated other Thai texts which proved important for the research. I appreciate her contribution. Thanks are also due to those who helped me at Wat Phra Dhammakāya. The archive staff of the *Bangkok Post* were helpful, allowing me on several occasions to remain after office hours to research their extensive records.

Finally, thanks to my wife Rosalyn. She has been a constant source of encouragement to me throughout my research.

Edinburgh 2007

NOTE ON THE USE OF THAI WORDS AND REFERENCING

It may be assumed that the romanising of the Thai script is phonetic. The only exceptions are a very few word endings where the final letter of the Thai word reads one way but is pronounced another! For example, in Thai, a final ‘l’ is read ‘n’, thus what is pronounced ‘Mahidon’ is spelt ‘Mahidol’. Those skilled in romanising Thai script may wince at ‘Luang Phaw’ (Venerable Father) preferring ‘Luang Phoh’ but I have felt it best to follow Wat Phra Dhammakāya’s rendering of the title.

Pāli words are italicised and diacritical marks are used. Thai words are also italicised except in the case of names. For example, *Dhammakāya* meditation as it refers to a technical term within Buddhism; Wat Phra Dhammakāya, however, is not italicised as it refers to a temple and a movement. It appears to be a general convention not to use diacritical marks with Thai words. I depart from this protocol, however, if the Thai word is also a Pāli word, for example, *mahā*. Since I am dealing with Theravāda Buddhism I use Pāli terms, for example, ‘*nibbāna*’ rather than the Sanskrit term ‘*nirvāṇa*’. The only exception to this is the use of ‘*karma*’ (Sanskrit), rather than the not well-known Pāli term ‘*kamma*’.

In the Thai context, the name that is used is the given name rather than the surname. In order to standardise the referencing and bibliography of the book, I have used the surname of Thai nationals as the official name.

The Thai use the Buddhist calendar, dating from the *parinibbāna* of the Buddha, thus 2006 CE is 2549 in the Buddhist Era. I use the Christian era equivalent for the publication date of the Thai texts.



Map 1 Map of Thailand.

Source: Reproduced with permission of the Central Intelligence Agency.

INTRODUCTION

The two New Buddhist Movements studied in this thesis emerged in Thailand in the 1970s. The social context included the emergence of an increasingly well-educated middle class, political control by the military and political protests by the people (1970 and 1973). In addition, an unstable situation was created by the activities of the Thai Communist Party and the war in Vietnam. There was also the difficulty of relating traditional Buddhist values to a generation very different from previous generations. These two movements have developed their own identities since Santi Asoke was excommunicated from the *Saṅgha* in 1990 after 15 years of controversy.[1] In 1999, the Wat Phra Dhammakāya movement came close to leaving the *Saṅgha* after an intense period of allegations of unorthodox teaching, forceful marketing strategies and the alleged mishandling of funds by the abbot.

This book sets out to answer the following five questions

- How did the Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke movements begin and develop?
- What are their distinctive features and why do they appeal to their respective memberships?
- How accurate are the outsiders' descriptions and analyses of the two movements?
- How do the members of these movements go about their spiritual development?
- What do the findings of this research contribute to an understanding of the possible future structure of state regulated Buddhism within Thailand, and possible implications this may have for Thai society.[2]

Discussion of terms such as 'sect', 'cult', their Thai equivalents and 'New Buddhist Movement'

It seems appropriate at this stage to define some key terms.

Sect

A 'religious group or movement which has broken away from a more orthodox mainstream religious denomination, or represents an entirely new religious formation' (Barnard and Burgess, 1996:481). A sect may be viewed by the mainstream group it has departed from, or society in general, as schismatic, heterodox or heretical. Adherents of the new sect will usually judge the mainstream as having failed to maintain orthodoxy, or as being unwilling to accept new truth/practice.

The term *sect* seems to be an accurate one for Wat Phra Dhammakāya as it captures something of some deviance away from mainstream but with a lack of actual rejection by it. Indeed, this movement is actively involved in helping the aging and frail leadership (Thai *Mahā thera samakom*) of the Thai *Saṅgha*. Santi Asoke have been excommunicated from the Thai *Saṅgha* principally for their harsh criticism of what they consider to be lax behaviour among mainstream monks and refusing to comply with orders from monastic leadership. A result of this excommunication is that a good number of critics would say 'Santi Asoke are not proper Buddhists' – at least not the state regulated Thai version of Buddhism! Informed observers of the religious scene in the kingdom view Santi Asoke as being much further from mainstream than Wat Phra Dhammakāya.

Cult

Derived from the Latin *cultus* ('worship'), a cult is a religious movement which draws its inspiration from other than the primary religion of the culture (Glock and Stark, 1965:245). Clearly both Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke are thoroughly Buddhist in orientation, although they borrow from non-standard Thai interpretations of Buddhism. Technically, they may be described as sects but not cults. Sometimes, however, critics of a group will vilify the group by referring to it as a cult. It may be that critics justify the usage of the term by the 'cult-like' characteristics of the group, such as the dissolving of marriages, and the unquestioning acceptance of all that the leader says.

New Religious Movement

This term is used as an umbrella term for 'movements or organisations that have been called "alternative religions", "non-conventional religions," "cults" or "contemporary sects" ' (Barker, 1989:4). The two movements considered in my research began in the 1970s, have well-defined structures and procedures and clearly qualify as 'New Religious Movements'. They may more accurately be referred to as *New Buddhist Movements*.

It is important to consider the terms the Thai use for 'movement'. *Klum* and *khana* are Thai words meaning 'group', or *movement*. *Puak* and *fai* may also be used for *group* or *movement* although, when used, tend to have a negative connotation.

False (*te am*) when used of a group indicates false teaching, while *laa te* corresponds directly to our word *cult*.[3] Nevertheless, Thai tend to be less exclusive in their language than Westerners and use less condemnatory speech. There is also an understandable tendency among Thai to present Buddhism as unified, rather than divided. This is demonstrated by the fact that I seldom heard Thai who are critical of these movements refer to them as *cults* (Thai *laa te*).

It is attractive to describe these two movements as fraternities (Thai *nikai*) of Buddhism. This, however, becomes problematic in the Thai Buddhist context as the Mahānikai and Thammayut orders are the only official fraternities within Thai Buddhism.[4] *Chao* is a Thai term meaning 'people of a certain country' and Santi Asoke members use it while speaking of themselves that, that is, *Chao* Asoke. Wat Phra Dhammakāya members define themselves as those who go to the Phra Dhammakāya temple, thus for a man '*pom bi Wat Phra Thammakai*'. The movement is also known as the Dhammakāya Foundation (*Monetee Thammakai*).

Model of research

There is a full description of the research methodology in Appendix One. I have located this in the appendices as I recognise some readers may be frustrated by being presented with several pages of methodological explanation! What follows is a brief introduction to my approach to the study of the movements.

I have sought to avoid 'projection' and 'reduction' ideas and tried to gain, to the extent it is possible, an insider's (*emic*) understanding of both movements. The projection approach assumes that a movement's belief and practice is simply a creation out of the needs and aspirations of those who belong to the movement. Traditionally, it has been used to show how human needs have created the image of some ultimate being, rather than man receiving revelation from that being. The reduction approach 'explains religious phenomena (hence reducing it) in terms of the methods employed and the conclusions reached by disciplines other than religion' (Cox, 1992:43).

The thrust of the phenomenological approach is an attempt to justify the study of religion on its own terms rather than on the terms of the theologian or social scientist' (Erricker, 1999:83). While there is no firm agreement on a definitive phenomenological approach to the study of religions, it is a model that is quite widely used. Those who use it seek to understand that religion, or movement, on its own terms. Through a process (described in Appendix One) I arrived at an understanding of the movements based on my observation of life within the movements, as well as information and explanation from insiders. At this stage in the research I began to examine possible ways in which sociological and cultural forces may have shaped these movements. That is, I gathered and engaged with *etic* (outsiders' views). Some of these outsiders were academics researching in the area. Others were lay people who had contact with the movements. In addition, I used typologies used in the classification of movements and applied these to Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke. The use of these typologies widened the

discussion as links were made to other movements which were not immediately obvious. I also tried to define how these movements work (and attract new members) by examining how their leadership functions in terms of the accepted Thai qualities of leadership, namely, power (*amnāt*), influence (*ittiphon*) and moral goodness (*pāramī*).

Brief remarks on some sociological factors that produce change

If religion does not continue to meet changing needs, adherents will declare it irrelevant, or have only a very nominal commitment to it. New Religious Movements thrive in rapidly changing social conditions. They provide meaning and purpose by offering an explanation of, or ways of dealing successfully with change. A new group may either reject or embrace new forces such as consumerism or globalisation.

The researcher of New Religious Movements in the 'Two Third's' world needs to be aware of the way movements are or have responded to forces such as secularisation, globilasation, urbanisation, economic growth and decline and dynamics of the nation state. These issues are now briefly identified.

Secularisation may be regarded as the shrinking relevance of the values of religion to integrate individuals in society, or legitimise political or social structures.[5] Wilson defines secularisation as 'The decline of the influence of religious institutions, thinking and practices upon social life' (Barnard and Burgess, 1996:323).

To combat secularisation, religious groups will often make considerable effort to make religion appear vibrant again. This has certainly been the case in Thailand since the establishing of a modern education system where schools are no longer based in temples and monks no longer teach. Monks have had to face a diminished role in Thai society for some time. The major challenge facing the *Saṅgha*, however, is reassuring the Thai people of the high moral standards of the monks, as the press have reported a number of financial and sexual scandals in which monks have allegedly been involved.

Globalisation involves the movement of goods, finance, ideas, fashion, people, information, leisure and social activities around the world. The key issue for sociologists is the manner in which these movements create problems for a particular nation's social life and political governance. Economic globalisation, spearheaded by multinational companies, 'is widely understood to have led to the reduced control of nation states over economic policy' (Nash, 2000:49). There is pressure then on countries to create a good climate for the multinational corporations, otherwise they will lose business to other countries. At the same time they are left to manage the negative consequences of globalisation such as excessive economic dependence on the multinational companies, loss of political power over the nation, ecological damage and erosion of traditional values and/or cultural distinctives.

Globalisation is translated into Thai as '*lukanuwat*'. It is derived from *lok* the Thai word for world.[6] The word is closely associated with *lokiya* 'worldliness' and thus has a negative connotation for many Thai. It 'evokes all that is unethical and immoral about the consequences of the globalizers' practices' (Reynolds, 2002:318).

MacDonalds, Svensens and Pizza Hut workers are being de-cultured through serving in these restaurants, as are those who use them. For the traditionalist, it appears that Western values have hijacked local culture. There is a cultural tension between the tradition and progress. Western food chains and fashion items such as Nike trainers, while powerful icons of globalisation, are not the only disseminators of Western values. Satellite TV and the Internet are also incredibly influential. What is being globalised is a secular capitalist system which is 'almost totally orientated to the accumulation of wealth rather than to the satisfaction of basic human needs' (Padilla, 2001:7).

Consumerism has been defined as 'a culture centred on the promotion, sale and acquisition of consumer goods' (Bilton *et al*., 1996:656). The teachings of Buddhism and Christianity address the materialism associated with a consumer mentality, possibly through redistribution of wealth, or a simpler lifestyle.

New Religious Movements are not only brought about by changes in society. Sometimes they emerge due to tensions within religious traditions. Examples of this would include a group's perceived loss of commitment to its religious values, or leaders who are considered to be too lax in their practice, or are understood to be no longer teaching 'the truth'. Often personality conflicts are dressed up as doctrinal controversies and a new group emerges! The new group is invariably marginalised by the old group, and perhaps even by society. In time, as leadership of the new group mellows and the issues that inspired the breakaway from mainstream are addressed, the new group may be viewed as much less radical.

Field work

Interviews and questionnaires within the movements

Santi Asoke: I was permitted to attend the *Puttha Pisek* festival at Phai Sali, some 300 kilometres north of Bangkok. More than 1,000 members gathered for six days of intensive teaching. I was privileged to be assigned two informants who steered me through the programme which started at 03:15 and went on to 21:00. They were skilled at explaining the reasons that underpinned Santi Asoke practice, such as walking barefoot and washing dishes in a particular way. As well as observing and participating in the various activities, I had opportunities to interview various members. Interviews were mainly carried out in Thai. I was also able to conduct a questionnaire in Thai. This was qualitative in nature and invited a 'free-text' response. The questionnaire was examined by several monastics for approval and then distributed to the lay membership. I received 62 returns from the 94 distributed questionnaires. Translation of the questionnaires was carried

out by two Thai as I found the translation very time consuming due to 'hard to read' handwriting and some difficult terminology. I was involved, however, in working with both translators and was able to clarify any questions I had regarding aspects of translation.

During my three field visits (1999, 2001 and 2002), I was able to stay on two separate occasions at Phatom Asoke, some 60 kilometres to the east of Bangkok, and also visit extensively at Santi Asoke in Bangkok. On these occasions I was able to have informal conversations as well as conduct formal interviews with monastics (including Bodhirak, the founder of the movement) and lay members. Normally Thai was used for these interviews but sometimes the interviewees spoke good English.

I was also able to make visits to Wat Phra Dhammakāya in 2001, but because of the intense media attention they were receiving, and their difficulties with the *Saṅgha* leadership, they were unwilling for me to conduct questionnaire work, or discuss controversial issues such as their views on the nature of *nibbāna*. I was, however, able to visit Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāyaram, a temple which uses the same meditation model as Wat Phra Dhammakāya, as well as Wat Paknam to which both of these movements trace their inception.

Media attention had considerably diminished by the time I carried out my third field visit (2002) and Wat Phra Dhammakāya responded positively to my supervisor's request for me to carry out research at the temple. I was assigned an *ubasok* who functioned as an informant, arranged for my visits to the temple and lined up interviews with Phra Dattacheewo, the acting abbot and another monastic.[7] I was able to talk to members freely on Sundays and observe a variety of ceremonies at the temple.

My practice was to explain that I was an academic researcher who already had a faith commitment (Christian) and not a seeker after a new set of beliefs. This clarified to informants the reason I required the information. If I were understood to be a seeker, then an informant might assume 'evangelistic mode' and be disappointed at the end of the conversations when I did not change my religious allegiance.[8]

I spent time in Thailand in August and September 2006 engaging with both movements. I provided copies of my thesis to representatives of both movements and invited their comments, unfortunately there was little feedback. I also took the opportunity to gather information to update the research.

Interviews and information gathering outwith the new movements

I attended the four day International Conference on Southeast Asian Studies at Mahidol University, Bangkok, in February 2001. This gave me the opportunity to discuss aspects of the two movements with Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn (whose doctoral work was on the Santi Asoke movement) and Peter Jackson (who has written widely on Thai religion and culture). During my second and third field trips I was able to meet with a number of specialists in Thai Buddhism both

monastic and lay. Phra Suthithammanuwat (formally known as Phramāha Thiab Mali), dean of one of the postgraduate schools at Mahāchulalongkorn University was helpful in arranging interviews and providing some research material. Dr Tavivat Puntarigvivat was a valuable source of information on aspects of Thai society as well as the proposed *Fourth Saṅgha Act*. During my third field trip I was able to discuss some aspects of both movements with Dr Apinya Feungfusakul, who completed doctoral work on these two movements in 1993.

There were many others outside the movement who provided information. As I travelled around people would ask me what I was doing and I would take the opportunity to ask about their perspectives on these two movements. One former member of Santi Asoke who remained positive towards the movement provided me with a particularly helpful way of understanding the Asoke 'mindset'. The archives of the *Bangkok Post* proved extremely useful for tracing the progression of the legal proceedings against the two movements.

Scope of the book

The preview of the book is as follows:

Introduction – Research objectives; discussion of some terms; methodological approach and some comments on sociological factors.

Literature review – An overview of the contribution of seven key writers in the field.

Chapter 1 setting the scene – The religious and socio-political context of the development of the two movements.

This section briefly examines the reforms initiated by King Mongut (1804–68) who was a monk for 27 years before ascending the throne in 1851. *The Saṅgha Acts* of 1902, 1941 and 1962 are examined. The proposed *Fourth Saṅgha Act* is also discussed. The main thread running through the development of Thai Buddhism since 1824 is the tensions between the Thammayut and Mahānikai fraternities. In brief, Mahānikai and Thammayut family allegiances are no longer as strong as they once were. In some cases it may be argued that a person who would gain from the flourishing of the traditional Thai political system, and who in the past would have had an allegiance to the Thammayut fraternity, would be attracted to the Wat Phra Dhammakāya movement. The ability of the Thai military to manipulate the state apparatus and its eventual loss of power is related to the emergence of the middle class with its desire to be involved in shaping issues that affect them, for example, the political process.

An analysis of Wat Phra Dhammakāya and its approach to spiritual purification – Chapter 2 traces the story of Luang Phaw Sot's alleged discovery of *Dhammakāya* meditation in Thailand. Luang Phaw Sot's career as abbot of Wat Paknam is discussed, as is his meditative practice. Khun Yai Chan's contribution as a teacher of meditation and encourager of her young students is recorded, and how this led to the inception of Wat Phra Dhammakāya. The growth of the temple and the associated Dhammakāya Foundation is described, as is the forming of

Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāyaram as a separate movement from Wat Phra Dhammakāya. There is description of some of the alleged land-owning irregularities associated with the abbot, and the associated legal proceedings. Highlights of my visits to the temple are recorded towards the end of this chapter.

Chapter 3 commences by offering an insiders' (*emic*) understanding of Wat Phra Dhammakāya, this highlights the movement's attraction for its members. Six perspectives are offered including having a leader with qualities of power (*amnāt*), influence (*ittipon*) and moral goodness (*pāramī*). Six similarities between the Wat Phra Dhammākaya movement and Sāka Gakkai are discussed.[9] This serves to highlight some of the movement's distinctive features. Four outsiders' (*etic*) perspectives on Wat Phra Dhammakāya movement are examined. These include fundamentalism, millenarianism, a neo-galactic structure and a Buddhist prosperity movement. Typologies traditionally used to classify New Religious Movements are examined to see if any are useful in the quest to understand Wat Phra Dhammakāya.

Chapter 4 focuses on Wat Phra Dhammakāya's approach to spiritual development. The movement's understanding of *nibbāna* and *āyatananibbāna* is examined, as is the model of meditation. There is discussion about Tibetan and Yogāvacara practices as being a possible source of Luang Phaw Sot's approach to meditation.

An analysis of Santi Asoke and its approach to spiritual purification – Chapter 5 traces the life of Rak Rakphong and the founding of the Santi Asoke movement. There is considerable description of Chamlong Srimuang's political career and involvement with Santi Asoke.[10] The legal proceedings against the movement which eventually led to excommunication from the *Saṅgha* are examined. There is description of the various Asoke communities based on my visits, interviews and reading. Structures of the movement, its use of schools and adult education are mentioned, as are its yearly festivals.

Chapter 6 commences with four insiders' (*etic*) understandings of Santi Asoke. Four key distinctives of Santi Asoke are examined. Theories that have been put forward by outsiders to explain/classify Santi Asoke are described and evaluated. These include 'fundamentalist', 'millenarian', a Buddhist version of Christian 'base communities' and a 'community culture' movement. I suggest an understanding of Santi Asoke as an ascetic/prophetic utopian movement with strong (nomian) legalistic tendencies. As with Wat Phra Dhammakāya, typologies are examined to see if they may be used helpfully to explain and categorise.

Chapter 7 focuses on Santi Asoke's approach to spiritual development. The Asoke understanding of *nibbāna* is considered, as is the Asoke approach to meditation, the Eightfold Path and spiritual development.

In conclusion, a summary of the answers to the first four research questions is made. The final research question is answered as suggestions are made regarding the future of state-regulated Buddhism within Thailand, and possible implications these may have for society within the kingdom.

REVIEW OF SCHOLARLY LITERATURE ON THE WAT PHRA DHAMMAKĀYA AND SANTI ASOKE MOVEMENTS

By the mid-1980s, the Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke movements had gained a high profile in Thai society. The former sent teams of white clothed members, predominantly students, into the housing estates to collect donations and recruit members. Santi Asoke were under investigation by the *Saṅgha* but had also attracted the attention of the populace with their rigorous practice and association with Chamlong, the then governor of Bangkok. Scholars thus began to investigate both movements at that stage, and published work soon followed. This review examines what I consider to be important texts on these movements.

Peter Jackson was born in Sydney, Australia in 1956. He first became known in the field of Thai studies with his 1988 publication *Buddhadāsa: A Buddhist Thinker for the Modern World*. In 1989 he published *Buddhism, Legitimation and Conflict: The Political Functions of Urban Thai Buddhism*. This work is presented in two parts. It commences with an overview of Buddhism and the Thai elite. The second part examines the life and beliefs of some reformist monks including Buddhadāsa. The Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke movements are comprehensively covered. Jackson points out that although Wat Phra Dhammakāya is in the Mahānikai fraternity it is highly likely that it has members with Thammayut affiliations (traditionally associated with the establishment).[1] The movement has drawn a number of upper class laity who benefit from association with the establishment, viewing Wat Phra Dhammakāya as a means of preserving the status quo of traditional governance. Drawing from some findings that Jackson cites (1989:86), these probably would be people who appreciate the outward demonstration of discipline, good organisation, association with the royal family, bureaucracy and the military but are less concerned about orthodox teaching. Wat Phra Dhammakāya, according to Jackson is

> [T]he religious expression of a political establishment which is seeking to retain its power by co-opting members of the increasingly wealthy and influential middle class, in particular, that section of the middle class seeking to establish itself in the patterns of authority and power.
> (1989:205)

Wat Phra Dhammakāya utilises intense meditation training reminiscent of the Thai forest tradition. By undertaking such training some meditators attain unusual psychic or spiritual experiences. Jackson (1989:206) argues that such followers 'appropriate for themselves the spiritual power and legitimacy which has traditionally been attributed to the forest monks'. This has the effect of reducing the sacred aura perceived by many to surround monks in the forest tradition.

In chapter seven of his book, Jackson carefully analyses factors contributing to the discourse within the Santi Asoke movement. First, Bodhirak's understanding of Buddhadāsa (1906–93).[2] In some of his writings, Bodhirak acknowledges the significant influence of Buddhadāsa on his thinking. However, he goes on to show how his 'teachings represent a development and improvement over those of the senior monk' (Jackson, 1989:165). Buddhadāsa taught his followers not to cling strongly to anything, yet Buddhadāsa's views have become so highly esteemed that many cling dogmatically to his teachings. According to Bodhirak, this strong attachment to Buddhadāsa's ideas will block perceptions of truth (Jackson, 1989:165). Jackson correctly describes Bodhirak's commitment to ethical, rather than meditative practice and his criticism of teachers who do not insist on the translation of teaching into practice.

Second, Jackson (1989:166–8) discusses the Asoke members' mindset by juxtaposing them with typical supporters of Buddhadāsa. In summary, Asoke members may be understood as coming from the merchant or small businessmen/tradesmen class who (like Bodhirak) are of Chinese or Sino-Thai extraction.[3] While being rationalistic and critical of what they regard as supernatural practices within Buddhism, they do not go quite as far as Buddhadāsa, who de-emphasises some aspects of Buddhist belief, for example, *karma*. Bodhirak's followers are disenchanted with the political system which is implicitly supported by the Buddhism of the establishment. To join Asoke is to protest against being marginalised and to participate in a community that offers a different way of living.

Third, Jackson analyses the critical response of Anan Senakhan to Santi Asoke.[4] The analysis of Anan's protest gives insight into some aspects of Thai society, and helps the reader better understand the Asoke movement. Jackson points out that both Anan and Bodhirak believe that Buddhism in Thailand has been corrupted. Bodhirak has responded by withdrawing from the *Saṅgha*. Anan's response is to reform it from within, thus avoiding divisive factions which could undermine the security and integrity of Thai Buddhism. Jackson suggests that considerations of the backgrounds of Bodhirak and Anan help to understand these differences. Bodhirak is a former TV personality and member of the middle class. This, along with his Chinese–Thai ethnic mix locates him outside of the establishment. It seems unreasonable for him to support something which is not disposed to benefiting him or those from a similar background. In contrast, Anan is a former member of the 'Thai bureaucracy and he identifies strongly with the monarchy, symbols of national unity and with political policies which perpetuate the pivotal place of the Thai bureaucracy as an agent and administrator

of the centralist policies of the state' (Jackson, 1989:171). Anan sees Bodhirak as dangerous precisely because his criticisms of the *Saṅgha* are legitimate! Yet to attack the *Saṅgha* (and control of it by the state) and seek independent sources of authority is to weaken society and create confusion.

Jackson's analysis of these movements reflects an in-depth understanding of the Thai socio-political scene. Much has happened in the field since his book was published in 1989. Jackson briefly reflects this in a chapter entitled 'Buddhism's Changing Political Roles'.[5]

> It is no longer possible to make a strong claim that any particular religious form is politically crucial as an ideological justification for a given sector's position or role in society . . . Legitimacy in Thailand, as in most capitalist countries, is now framed largely in terms of instrumental values, that is, the state's capacity to deal effectively with social, economic and ecological problems and to increase the material well being of the population.
>
> (1997:77)

Jackson argues that the lack of reform of the *Saṅgha* indicates that 'religion has become increasingly separated from state political processes' (Jackson, 1997:77). While recognising that individuals are still religious, Jackson appears to suggest that the political apparatus no longer feels the need to regulate Buddhism. This demonstrates that a secularisation of the establishment has been in process.

Donald Swearer, professor of religion at Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania has spent some years teaching in Thailand and has researched Thai Buddhism extensively. Written in 1991, his chapter in *Fundamentalisms Observed* is important to the study of Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke, as it discusses the distinctive features of fundamentalism in Theravāda Buddhism.[6] Initially, Swearer suggests that Wat Phra Dhammakāya seeks to recreate the old galactic policy with the intention of restoring a 'vivid and dynamic past to a fragmented Thai society and a political environment continually beset by corruption and factionalism, in which the symbolic power of the monarchy is waning and the practical power of religion is virtually non-existent' (Swearer, 1991:657).[7] This perceptive point highlights the pivotal role of the temple. For example, ascetic forest practice is arranged to take place in the temple grounds rather than in a forest in the provinces. I engage with Swearer regarding the galactic model in the *etic* perspectives on Wat Phra Dhammakāya towards the end of the Chapter 3.

Swearer points out that Wat Phra Dhammakāya's decision not to open other temples throughout the country protects it from the charge of creating a new sectarian tradition. He also notes that this has been unnecessary as the movement dominates the Buddhist societies of virtually all the universities and colleges in the country.

Swearer views fundamentalism in Sri Lanka and South-East Asia as a reaction to the introduction of Western values, technology, education and political systems.

He suggests that they may be even characterised as ‘postmodern in that it seems to be a direct consequence of, and formed in reaction to, the adjustments traditional Theravāda Buddhism made to the challenge of modernity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’ (Swearer, 1991:677). He views the following distinctives as part of fundamentalism in Theravāda Buddhist societies in the region:

- A quest for identity (national, communal and individual). This search involves a return to what is perceived to be primordial and ideal;
- Strong, charismatic leaders whose followers consider themselves to be under threat;
- Ideologies which tend to rest on simplistic, dualistic and absolutistic worldviews. That is, non-negotiable understandings of what is acceptable/ unacceptable with no possibility of synthesis of extremes;
- Often exclusive (sometimes evangelistic), the movements reject competing views as ‘morally evil, spiritually confused, and/or intellectually misguided’;
- An obsessive sense of their unique role or destiny. Such movements may be ‘quasi-messianic or explicitly millenarian’;
- A tendency to stress the value of direct experience coupled with plain and simple religious practice.

Wat Phra Dhammakāya, according to Swearer

> [A]stutely packages a fundamentalistic form of Thai Buddhism that offers a way of embracing a secularized modern lifestyle while retaining the communal identity once offered by traditional Buddhism – all the while maintaining that it is ‘authentic’ or ‘true’ Buddhism, in contrast to its competitors.
>
> (1991:666)

Swearer sees Santi Asoke’s ‘born-again Buddhism’ as exhibiting several aspects of fundamentalism. He understands the movement to be reacting against a secular, materialistic culture which is replacing a traditional life informed by *Dhammic* principles. Furthermore, Swearer understands Asoke to have a dualistic and absolutist *Weltanschauung*.

Phra Ajahn Mahā Sermchai Jayamanggalo (now referred to as Phra Rajyanvisith is the abbot of Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāyaram and is also director of the Dhammakāya Buddhist Meditation Institute.[8] His book (English Language) *The Heart of Dhammakāya Meditation* was published in 1991. The writer, formally a researcher and lecturer, entered the monkhood in 1986. He was appointed abbot of the newly registered Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāyaram temple in 1991 and continues to be in demand as a meditation teacher. His publication is a detailed manual of *Dhammakāya* meditation. Wat Phra Dhammakāya have recently simplified this approach. In addition, Sermchai’s book defines

terms, and explains concepts. For example, he asserts that all conditioned things are non-self but *nibbāna* is self, a departure from orthodox Theravāda, which views *nibbāna* as non-self. Phra Rajyanvisith maintains that the Five Aggregates being conditioned phenomena cannot possess the *nibbānic* condition (1991:72). The *nibbānic* condition may, however, be possessed by the *Dhammakāya* (as it is unconditioned). *Nibbāna* is an unchanging, permanent existence, devoid of all defilements and is supreme happiness. Through knowledge of the *Dhammakāya*, *nibbāna* may be experienced.

Apinya Feungfusakul, a Thai, lecturers in sociology at the University of Chiang Mai (northern Thailand). She completed her doctoral work in 1993 at the University of Bielefeld, Germany. Her thesis is entitled *Buddhist Reform Movements in Contemporary Thai Urban Context: Thammakai and Santi Asoke*.[9]

Feungfusakul shows that the traditional social image of the monk is one who both represents transcendence and is a community leader. As communities are no longer dependent on monastics for education, medicine, etc., a gap has emerged between society and the *Saṅgha*. This has resulted in a loss of status for monastics who are now only largely required for religious rituals. Within the *Saṅgha* there are those who are considering how a restoration of monks' status might best be achieved. One issue currently being discussed is the nature of the lay persons' religious need and how it may best be addressed by monastics.

Feungfusakul (1993:195) takes the view that Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke 'chose to secure their own channel of resource acquisition through tighter organisation and control of their lay sub-groups'. She suggests that merit making and how it is legitimised and connected to the transcendent level is a key issue here. According to Feungfusakul (1993:195), Wat Phra Dhammakāya's 'conformist disposition enables it to synthesize consumerist competitive and advertising strategy with the traditional belief of merit accumulation which ends up in the merchandization of merit'. Wat Phra Dhammakāya offer a variety of options, and have an emphasis on convenience and comfort. This then revitalises traditional belief in *karmic* theory as the accumulation of merit through the cycle of rebirths.

In contrast, Santi Asoke takes a non-traditional approach. Rather than a focus on individual cause and effect, Santi Asoke considers the act of merit making as taking into account a wider social implication. The merit-making act and its effect should be viewed in the context of society; therefore any kind of social exploitation is a sin (Feungfusakul, 1993:195). Thus for Asoke, economics and social relationships in the community must be part of the realisation of the transcendence goal. This goal may only be realised 'within favourable and suitable worldly conditions' (Feungfusakul, 1993:195).

Feungfusakul highlights the way in which both movements seek to restore the status of their monks through a rigorous recruitment policy and strict monastic practice. She also shows how these two 'reform movements' move away from the traditional view of 'salvation in this life' being possible only for monks. If salvation is for the 'here and now' for both monk and lay person, then there is a shift

from 'emphasis on merit making rituals to ascetic practices based on conscious individual effort in mundane daily activities' (Feungfusakul,1993:197). Wat Phra Dhammakāya members emphasise the importance of daily meditation and observance of the Precepts. Santi Asoke members focus on rigorous keeping of the Precepts and continual self-control. Lay members of both movements thus live 'exemplified' lives.

According to Fuengfusakul (1993:202), in order for movements to achieve self-affirmation, they must either negate or separate themselves from mainstream Thai Buddhism. Wat Phra Dhammakāya segregates itself from mainstream by its emphasis on the superiority of its meditation method and its modern organisational structure. It seeks to retain links with the *Saṅgha* through good relationships with senior monastics. On the other hand, Asoke nourishes its self-image by projecting an image of the Thai *Saṅgha* as 'impure'. The expression of segregation and negation require the invention of new symbols, for example, uniform: white clothes for Wat Phra Dhammakāya and blue peasant outfits for Asoke lay members.[10] Other examples of this include a new form of greeting used by Santi Asoke members, and the adaptation of a crystal ball as Wat Phra Dhammakāya's sacred symbol (Feungfusakul, 1993:202). Both movements associate their identity with the early Buddhist tradition. Wat Phra Dhammakāya relate to Buddhist texts which it sees as supporting its view of the nature of *Dhammakāya*, while Santi Asoke presents itself as a traditional Buddhist community from a previous era.

In a Thai journal[11] Feungfusakul (1998:64–7) describes the 'myth' circulating within the Wat Phra Dhammakāya community.[12] Prior to the creation of this world there was *Dhammakāya*, within which there existed a dualism of good (white party) and evil (black party). A war between the two parties led to the creation of a new world. This new order was destroyed by the Black *Dhammakāya*. Another world was created which was again destroyed by the Black *Dhammakāya*. The White *Dhammakāya* responded by giving mankind certain qualities of wisdom, understanding, etc. The Black *Dhammakāya* retaliated by sending lust into the world which resulted in mankind killing each other. The current status is one where only those who practise *Dhammakāya* meditation may break out of their deluded state and behave in an enlightened manner. Phra Dhammachayo, the movement's leader, is an *Awatan* (Thai) or *Avatāra* (Pāli) who was part of the original White *Dhammakāya* party. Some members at the temple view him as their deliverer from the forces of the Black *Dhammakāya*, and also as the one who leads them in the ongoing war.[13] The dissonance between such beliefs and orthodox Theravāda ideas is notable.

Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn is a Finnish academic who currently lectures at the Salaya campus of Mahidol University, just outside Bangkok. Her doctoral thesis *Santi Asoke Buddhism and Thai State Response* was published in 1996.[14] In 1997, Heikkilä-Horn published a revised version of her thesis in English. It is entitled *Buddhism with Open Eyes: Belief and Practice of Santi Asoke*.[15] The book was published by Fah Apai, the Santi Asoke publishing house. Heikkilä-Horn lived

at Santi Asoke in Bangkok for six months gathering data for her research. Indeed, she has expressed concern that 'The few academic articles concerning Santi Asoke are not based on first hand knowledge and seem to rely on information supplied by the critics of the Santi Asoke group' (Heikkilä-Horn, 1997:9).

Buddhism with Open Eyes: Belief and Practice of Santi Asoke gives good insight into day to day living in the Asoke communities. There is detailed description of progression within the movement, organisational structures and various ceremonies. Apart from these insightful observations the writer makes the following important points. First, she suggests that there is a clear connection between the crushing of the student movements of the early 1970s, the de-robing of dissident monks and the emergence of alternative Buddhist groups, including Santi Asoke (Heikkilä-Horn, 1997:110).[16]

Second, Heikkilä Horn writes that Wat Phra Dhammakāya was perceived as acceptable by the state whereas Santi Asoke was censored by the *Saṅgha*. She suggests that this is because Asoke was strongly associated with General Chamlong, the then governor of Bangkok and leader of the Phalang Dhamma Party.[17] Heikkilä-Horn proposes that 'orthodox Buddhism' and 'unorthodox Buddhism' in Thailand are terms which are defined by the state authority rather than by any independent or Buddhist scholarly authority (Heikkilä-Horn, 1997:203). Wat Phra Dhammakāya was not pursued by the *Saṅgha* until the economic recession of 1997 because it enjoyed protection from senior political and military personnel.

Third, Asoke holds egalitarian and democratic values for which activists fought in the 1970s. While acknowledging that she did not meet any such activists in Asoke, Heikkilä-Horn argues that people joined the movement because of the 'sense of frustration that they felt towards the mainstream *Saṅgha's* corrupt and lax practices' (Heikkilä-Horn, 1997:205).

Heikkilä-Horn suggests that Santi Asoke may be a millenarian movement (Thai *phu mi bhun*). She has indicated that this is an idea which she wished to develop, linking the millenarian movements in North-East Thailand at the beginning of the twentieth century to the emergence of Santi Asoke.[18] I describe these and the *Huppasawan* movement under 'Wat Phra Dhammakāya – a millenarian movement?' in Chapter 3. I engage with Heikkilä-Horn's hypothesis of Santi Asoke as a millenarian movement in Chapter 6.

Jeffery Bowers published *Dhammakāya Meditation in Thai Society* in 1996. This is the fruit of his research undertaken while a MA student at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok. Bowers expresses concern that writers on Wat Phra Dhammakāya have not visited the temple as often as necessary in order to gain a good understanding of the movement and its model of meditation.

A strength of Bowers' work is his engagement with the three movements which teach *Dhammakāya* meditation.[19] His section on the development of Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāyaram is important as this school of *Dhammakāya* meditation is virtually ignored by researchers.[20] Bowers draws on his knowledge of *Dhammakāya* meditation which he gained from Phra Rajyanvisith (whose book

we have briefly mentioned). There is a clear description of the process of this model of meditation, along with an explanation of what is experienced at each stage.

Bowers makes two important contributions to research in this area. First, he points to a number of similarities between *Dhammakāya* meditation and Tibetan Tantric practices (Bowers, 1996:33–45). In Chapter 4, I engage with Bowers' hypothesis that Luang Phaw Sot developed the *Dhammakāya* model of meditation as a result of meeting a practitioner from within the Tibetan tradition.

Second, Bowers explains aspects of higher-level *Dhammakāya* meditation (*wicha-rop*): the 'ongoing universal battle of good over evil where high-level *Dhammakāya* meditators use their powers obtained in *Dhammakāya* meditation to defeat Māra, the leader of evil in the universe' (Bowers, 1996:24). While this was an essential feature of Luang Phaw Sot's work at Wat Paknam, monastics are reluctant to discuss it with outsiders, thus this important information is hard to obtain.

Most of the research on these movements has taken place in the early 1990s.[21] Much has happened since then both in Thai society and also within the movements. This book examines the recent history of both movements – nine years is a long time in the life of a religious movement which is only 30 years old, especially if society is going through a period of change. In reviewing the literature I have concluded that the application of typologies which have been developed in the field of religious studies/social sciences would make an original contribution to an understanding of the movements. This forms part of my outsider's (*etic*) perspective. Also absent from previous writings on Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke is an analysis of how leadership of the movements function in terms of *amnāt* ('power'), *ittipon* ('influence') and *pāramī* ('moral stature/charisma'). These are the key components of leadership within Thai culture, and a study of their function in these contexts is helpful for an understanding of the movements.

Born in 1939, Phra Dhammapiṭaka (Prayudh Payutto) 'has emerged as the unrivalled dean of Thai Buddhist Scholarship' (Swearer, 1995:139). He has served as a visiting lecturer in America, published extensively in Thai and English, and in 1994, was one of the recipients of the UNESCO prize for Peace Education. His book *Karani Thammakai* 'The Dhammakāya Case' was published in 1998. This Thai text is a firm defence of the supremacy of the Pāli canon over other versions of the Buddhist scriptures and a clear warning not to draw ideas from Mahāyāna teachings. Indeed, he suggests that changes made to the Theravāda scriptures may uproot the *Saṅgha*. Phra *Dhammapiṭaka* highlights the importance of monks keeping the monastic code of discipline by suggesting that the *vinaya* is more important to Buddhism than the constitution is for the Thai nation. The systematic engagement with a variety of Wat Phra Dhammakāya's teachings from his understanding of the Pāli scriptures clearly demonstrates to the Thai that the movement is heretical in its beliefs.

Wat Phra Dhammakāya is well known for its provocative teaching that '*nibbāna* is *atta* [self]' and the belief that *nibbāna*, referred to as *āyatananibbāna*, is a literal realm in which all enlightened beings exist. The temple also believe

that advanced level *Dhammakāya* meditators may visit *āyatananibbāna* temporarily. Phra Dhammapiṭaka (1998:9) expresses the opinion that Wat Phra Dhammakāya do not stick to the Pāli cannon, and in absolute terms, there is no such thing as *atta*. Phra Dhammapiṭaka views *āyatananibbāna* as the *nibbāna*, or extinguishing of the fires of greed, hatred and delusion. Indeed, the scholar-monk (1998:80–6) comments that there is a lot of speculation on *nibbāna* and that the important issue is not to define *nibbāna* for others but rather to look into oneself to see if defilements are decreasing.

Towards the end of his book, Phra Dhammapiṭaka answers a series of questions about Wat Phra Dhammakāya. He begins with some comments about how the practice of magic does not lead to the reduction of sufferings. Indeed, the movement simply makes people too excited (Phra Dhammapiṭaka, 1998:358). This appears to be a reference to September and October 1998 when many thousands of Wat Phra Dhammakāya members claimed to have seen an image of Luang Phaw Sot in the middle of the sun. (They were miraculously able to look at the sun.) In the next section, the issue of making merit is addressed. Phra Dhammapiṭaka (1998:361) explains how making merit with a pure heart will lead to less suffering; in contrast, the will to benefit as a result of the action will lead to an increase of suffering. He goes on to say that the best form of merit making is keeping the Precepts, as opposed to making donations. In a similar vein, the author points out that religion has to do with creating people of high moral character rather than building grand buildings. Indeed, such people are of more importance than those who have great wealth. Later, Phra Dhammapiṭaka engages with the movement's belief that its Mahā Dhammakāya pagoda (*cetiya*), and indeed, the buildings that make up the temple complex, will become the eighth 'Wonder of the World'. He points out that the 'Wonders' did not reduce human attachments! Anyway, the modern wonders of the world are well known for being small (high-tech inventions) rather than huge buildings. There may be a pagoda many years into the future but the author asks 'will there also be Buddhism?' (Phra Dhammapiṭaka, 1998:374).

The scholar-monk (1998:377) goes on to make the point that Wat Phra Dhammakāya cannot create a centre by constructing an impressive building. Religions already have their centres, for example, Mecca and Lumbini. Buddhists go on pilgrimage to the birth place of the Buddha even although there is no large building there; they will not go to Wat Phra Dhammakāya, despite the impressive pagoda. Towards the end of this section, Phra Dhammapiṭaka suggests that if a large number attend a meeting and receive skillful teaching then that is certainly positive. If, however, they receive unskillful teaching then that is a tragedy as there are so many people. This remark is aimed at the large attendances at Wat Phra Dhammakāya. The author concludes by saying that many people feel better after taking drugs but that does not mean that taking drugs is a good activity!

1

SETTING THE SCENE

The religious and socio-political context of the development of the two movements

Emergence of the Thammayut and Mahānikai fraternities

In 1824, the 21-year-old Crown Prince Mongkut was ordained into the *Saṅgha*. Some 'fifteen days after the Prince's ordination, his father, King Rama II passed away and due to failing health he had been unable to find a successor to the throne' (Nyanasamvara, 1992:6). The charitable view is Prince Mongkut ordained to make merit for his ailing father. Another perspective (Heinze, 1977:24) and (Wyatt, 1984:167) is that the prince faced a dangerous political situation where the Privy Council preferred an older half-brother to become king; the *Saṅgha* was therefore the safest place for the prince.

Prince Mongkut commenced serious study of Pāli and religious texts.[1] 'Finding the practice of Thai Buddhism considerably at variance with the classic Theravāda canon, he took the daring step of breaking with Thai Buddhist traditions and borrowed the dress and disciplinary forms of the Mon sect' (Wyatt, 1969:27). Thus, Prince Mongkut had eighteen Mon monks re-ordain him on a raft on a canal in front of Wat Samorai (also known as Wat Rajadhiwat).[2]

Prince Mongkut began to give in-depth teaching to those within his care and insisted on strict adherence to the *vinaya*. In time, those who followed his practice were ordained according to the Mon lineage. In the late 1830s, Prince Mongkut was invited by the king to move with the monks under his tutelage to Wat Bowonniwet. There the prince became abbot and 'in effect the head of a separate order within the Siamese monkhood. Mongkut named it the Thammayutika [Thai Thammayut], the "Order Adhering to the *Dhamma*," the teachings of the Buddha, as contradistinguished from the older order, the Mahānikai, to whom Mongkut derogatively referred as the "Order of Long-Standing Habit" ' (Wyatt, 1984:176).[3] Currently there are around 450,000 monks in Thailand (out of *phansa*), of which 90 per cent are in the Mahānikai fraternity.[4]

The result of Prince Mongkut's study and reforms was a strict form of doctrinal Buddhism which swept away much of the magical practice (Thai *saiyāsat*, which Mongkut saw as what the Buddha referred to as Pāli *tiracchanavijja*, or 'base arts') of Buddhism as practised at that time. Jackson maintains that

King Mongkut's 'religious reforms in the 1830's also involved a rejection of the supernatural' (Jackson, 1989:58). Jackson suggests that Mongkut (who was then still a monk) rejected manipulation of protective power through the use of material objects such as magical amulets and cloths with magical formula written on them because it was based on local practice and did not contribute to support for the monarchy. On the other hand, as king, Mongkut promoted the Brahmanical deities as they were universal and served to unify the Siamese people. An example of this is his proposing of Phra Sayamdevadhirāja as the national deity, or spirit, of Siam. The *Lak Muang* or city foundation stone of Bangkok was first erected in 1782 by King Rama I and is said to be the shrine where the overlord or deity of Siam resides.

Ishii (1986:159) notes that the prince was aware that 'it was the folk beliefs appended to Buddhism that underlay their [the Western missionaries] contempt for his religion'. If Westerners were able to criticise or discredit Buddhism, then some Siamese might question their own cultural/religious practice. Worse, the legitimisation of the monarchy, which is supported by Buddhist belief might begin to be eroded. Certainly any criticism of Buddhism would be counterproductive to national identity, cohesion and the development of monarchical power which royalty was working towards. Wyatt takes the view that Prince Mongut's reforms created the emergence of a universal religion 'which could compete with Christianity for the allegiance of intellectual Thai minds on very favourable terms' (Wyatt, 1969:28).

The Saṅgha Act of 1902

In 1868, King Chulalongkorn (1853–1910) was appointed[5] to the throne as the fifth king of the Chakri dynasty on the death of his father King Mongut.[6] In 1898, shortly after his return from his first trip to Europe, King Chulalongkorn tasked Prince Wachirayan[7] (1860–1921) to carry out a 'Plan for the Organisation of Provincial Education'.[8] It became clear that educational development in the provinces depended on the cooperation of the *Saṅgha*. It was felt that there was a need to standardise and control the practice of the *Saṅgha*, nationwide Pure, consistent religious teaching and practice needed to be enforced as an impure *Saṅgha* would result in a loss of faith in Buddhism.[9] This would result in a shaking of the moral foundation of society, which in turn could lead to political instability, even lack of obedience to the king. At that time central religious control was limited and local practice varied considerably. In the north and north-east

> Buddhist texts were written in local languages, and monastic power practice varied widely. Local religious authority often rested with popular abbots. After the millenarian revolts, Bangkok was especially

> sensitive to the possibility of heterodox religion forming the basis for political opposition of the periphery against the center.
>
> (Phongpaichit and Baker, 1997:231)[10]

The government promulgated *The Buddhist Church Administration Act of the Ratanakosin year 121*; this is normally referred to as *The Saṅgha Act of 1902*. The drafting of the forty-five article document was overseen by Prince Wachirayan and was constructed to produce 'a unified national *Saṅgha* hierarchy for the first time in Siamese history and establish a centralized authority' (Suksamran, 1981:31). The king made or approved all important religious appointments and dissident monks throughout the nation could be disciplined. *The Saṅgha Act of 1902* 'paralleled the reforms of the secular bureaucracy which King Chulalongkorn had instituted in 1892' (Jackson, 1989:69) and allowed the government to keep tight control over the *Saṅgha*.

The Saṅgha Act of 1941

On 24 June 1932, while King Prajadhipok (who reigned from 1925 to 1935) was on holiday, a group of around 100 minor officials carried out a swift *coup d' etat*. The public were only aware of the event after it took place and there was only one minor shooting incident. Some 18 months later King Prajadhipok left for Europe to seek medical treatment and 'In March 1935, while still in Europe, he announced his abdication. The government chose as successor Prince Ananda Mahidol, who was then at school in Switzerland' (Phongpaichit and Baker, 1997:255). King Prajadhipok was Siam's last absolute monarch and for the next 15 years the country had no resident king.

The introduction of *The Saṅgha Act of 1941* is clearly related to the June 1932 transfer of power from the king and his advisors to a group of civil and military officials. The following quote encapsulates the spirit of the *Saṅgha* after the transition from absolute to constitutional monarchy:

> The new political ideas penetrated into the temple grounds. . . . Novices and young monks were sometimes requested not to leave the temple grounds during the period of revolutionary activity. The pull was too great, however. The roads of Bangkok were dotted with yellow robes during the exciting days. Some temples forbade discussion of political subjects. There were people who suggested that a democratic form of government was needed in the temples as well as elsewhere. To this some of the head priests agreed. Many more objected.
>
> (Suksamran, 1981:34)

Without meddling in the *Saṅgha* affairs, there was little the government could do to introduce a more democratic style of clerical governance. Senior Thammayut monks resisted any movement towards democracy as this would give the

Mahānikai monks a much greater influence in decision making and administration.[11] The Supreme Patriarch who was in the Thammayut fraternity died in 1937, and was replaced the following year by Somdet Phra Phutthajan from the Mahānikai fraternity. This was the first time in eighty-four years that a Mahānikai monk occupied the top position in the *Saṅgha*. With the cooperation of the new Supreme Patriarch the government passed *The Saṅgha Act of 1941*.

The Saṅgha Act of 1902 located authority in the Supreme Patriarch, who governed through a Council of Elders. *The Saṅgha Act of 1941* was 'closely modeled on civil government, and the Supreme Patriarch [Thai *Somdet Phra Saṅgharat*, monastic equivalent to the constitutional monarch] exercised power through and with the advice of a legislative *Saṅgha* council [Thai *Saṅgha Sapha*]. This council was headed by a clerical Prime Minister [Thai *Saṅgkhanayok*] and consisted of not more than 45 life-long members who were appointed by the Supreme Patriarch, mainly on the basis of seniority'. (Suksamran, 1981:36) Although this *Saṅgha* administration had the appearance of greater democracy than *The 1902 Saṅgha Act*, it remained well within the control of the government. The Supreme Patriarch's appointment was made by the king, acting on the advice of the government. The Minister of Education had to approve the appointment of ministers of the clerical cabinet (Article 28 of *The 1941 Saṅgha Act*). He also had the right to raise matters for discussion at the highest levels (Articles 16) and grant or refuse permission to publish (Article 27). Furthermore, the Minister of Education could overrule the decision of the *Saṅgha Sapha* (Suksamran, 1981:37).

The new administrative system meant that the majority of monks on the *Saṅgha Sapha* were Mahānikai, a change of status for the Thammayut fraternity who were clearly used to equality, if not dominance. Even more threatening to the Thammayut movement was the government's goal of bringing the two fraternities together.

> Some members of the government also intended the 1941 Act to provide the basis for the administrative absorption of the Thammayut order into the larger Mahānikai order, in order to remove an anti-democratic legacy of the absolute monarchy and a source of anti-democratic agitation within the *Saṅgha*.
>
> (Jackson, 1989:74)

In 1942, the government founded Wat Simahathat, a temple in the north of Bangkok. Six monks from both the Thammayut and Mahānikai traditions were in residence. The project to operate a bi-fraternal monastery was unsuccessful, and Wat Simahathat was eventually taken over by the Thammayut fraternity (Tiyavanich, 1997:190). An official review (Thai *saṅghayan*) by the *Saṅgha* was undertaken to unite the two fraternities. Both were unwilling to compromise on issues of clerical practice and all attempts to unify the two fraternities were abandoned in 1951.

The Saṅgha Act of 1962

In 1958, Prime Minister Sarit abolished the constitution and declared martial law. According to Suksamran (1981:39) he justified his authoritarian behaviour on the following exigencies:

- Communism was attempting to destabilize the nation by uprooting the monarchy and destroying Buddhism;
- Several political parties had abused the constitution and manipulated the principles of democracy for their own gain. Such behaviour, according to Sarit, would eventually destroy the nation;
- The worsening situation in Indochina due to communist activity.

(Suksamran, 1981:39)

It was inevitable that Sarit would intervene in the *Saṅgha*'s affairs for the following reasons:

- Buddhism legitimised the government and conflict between the two fraternities lowered the status of the *Saṅgha* in the eyes of the public;
- Since *The Saṅgha Act of 1941*, the administration of the *Saṅgha* was modelled on democratic principles. This ran counter to Sarit's centralised, authoritarian approach;
- The government recognised the potential of the *Saṅgha* to bring about national unity, thus functioning as a political tool.

Sarit increasingly concentrated on the monarch as both the focus of loyalty for the citizen and the source of legitimacy for the government. 'Government in turn became a secular arm of the semisacral kingship and was worthy of respect and obedience by virtue of that connection' (Wyatt, 1984:281).[12] The monarch was now high profile in Thai society, extensively touring in the provinces and officiating at important functions such as university graduation ceremonies.[13] The royal *kathin* ceremonies were reintroduced and the king went out in procession to offer robes to monks and donations to monasteries as well as presiding at ceremonies for the building of new temples (Phongpaichit and Baker, 1997:283).[14]

The 1962 Saṅgha Act is currently in force. It can be seen as a reversion to *The 1902 Saṅgha Act* and differs from *The 1941 Saṅgha Act* in that the Supreme Patriarch can make decisions without reference to his Council of Elders.[15] 'While bolstering the Supreme Patriarch's authority, however, the new act also deepened the *Saṅgha*'s subordination to secular authority, by stipulating that the Supreme Patriarch, whose tenure of office had hitherto been lifelong, could be dismissed by decree' (Ishii, 1986:116).[16] The Third Act did away with the Ecclesiastical Assembly, Ecclesiastical Cabinet and the Ecclesiastical Courts, replacing them with the *Mahā thera samakom* (Council of Elders). The *Mahā thera samakom* consists of around fourteen of the country's most senior monks, and 'the Director

General of the Department of Religious Affairs is the ex-officio president of the *Mahā thera samakom*. Thus all *Saṅgha* affairs are closely controlled and supervised, through the Secretary-General by the government' (Suksamran, 1981:42).

A proposed Fourth *Saṅgha Act* and the government–*Saṅgha* relationship

In 1982 the Ministry of Education (which administers the Department of Religious Affairs) set up a committee to examine possible changes to *The Saṅgha Act of 1962* and monastic regulations that were passed since then (Taylor, 1993:72). More recently, Phra Luang Da Mahābua investigated the way the *Saṅgha's* finance would be controlled in the new system and concluded that there were insufficient officials involved.[17] This has generated considerable discussion and is one of many reasons why progress is slow. Dr Tawevat Bontarigavewat speaks for many lay people who wish to see checks and balances built in to the monastic–laity–government relationship. This is viewed as an important component of good civil society. According to Dr Tawevat, the role of the government is to look after Buddhism 'at a distance' and allocate finance. The role of the monastics is the study of the *suttas* and the moral support of the laity. The laity should have a greater say in monastic affairs, such as deciding which monks and novices reside in their local temple. Phra Suthithammanuwat indicated that most of the *Saṅgha* would not accept these ideas, and while possibly open to suggestions from lay people, would expect monastics to retain control.[18]

The relationship of the government to Buddhism is a critical area. Many Buddhists feel betrayed by the government's decision not to officially recognise Buddhism as the state religion of the nation. The decision of the senate to name the new ministry dealing with religious and cultural affairs the 'Culture Ministry' was challenged by about '2,000 protestors . . . demanding the office be named the "Ministry of Buddhism and Thai Culture" ' (*Bangkok Post*, 21.9.02). These protestors view Article 38 of the constitution which states that 'any Thai is free to choose their religion' as a legal loophole capable of being used by those of other faiths to disrupt Buddhism.[19] Indeed, many see the Wat Phra Dhammakāya controversies as engineered by Christians who wish to see Buddhism in disarray. While 94 per cent of the population of 63 million are Buddhist, the Thai government does not wish that to translate into a constitutional statement which establishes Buddhism as the state religion. They believe this would create two groups within Thai society, namely Buddhists and non-Buddhists, this would result in conflict. Such a move would be viewed by secular, Western governments viewing such a decision as dated and backward.

Aspects of contemporary Thai Buddhist practice

Older people tend to take the opportunity to listen to the monks preach and chant at the temples on holy days (*wan phra*). They have more leisure than the younger

generation and because of the immanence of death are more interested in religion than their children and grandchildren. Younger people may attend the temple on festivals and for funerals. A good number will occasionally attend to make merit (for themselves or a departed loved one), seek supernatural help through chanting or prayer, or pastoral advice from a monk. Wat Phra Dhammakāya has been particularly successful in recruiting young, well-educated recruits, often through the activities of their younger members among their university friends.

The Phra Thammayut and the Phra Thammacharik monks (monastic community development and outreach activity) are mentioned in Chapter 6. The Thai forest tradition and the work of Buddhadāsa are briefly described in an attempt to widen the context of the inquiry into the two New Buddhist Movements.[20] Both movements tend to mimic the austere practices of the forest tradition and Santi Asoke has been influenced by Buddhadāsa's creative rationalising of Buddhism.[21]

The forest monks tend now to live in monasteries in rural areas, rather than wander in the forest.[22] This is in part due to deforestation but there was an attempt by the *Saṅgha* leadership to locate forest mendicants in the north-east region in monasteries. This appears to be an effort to control these wandering ascetics. The *phra thudong* tend to be associated with the Thammayut fraternity. In the late nineteenth century some of the well-known teachers in the forest tradition were re-ordained in Thammayut orders as they felt they and their disciples would have more time for meditation rather than if they remained within the Mahānikai order.[23] According to Tiyavanich (1997:264) another reason for the popular association of the *phra thudong* with the Thammayut fraternity are that the Thammayut are wealthier than the Mahānikai fraternity. Thus they have the ability to publish books (and often distribute freely) about their better known monks in the forest tradition.

Acharn Mun (1870–1949), Acharn Sao (1859–1942), Acharn Chah (also dead) and Acharn Mahābua are the best known teachers in the 'forest tradition'. Due to members of the royal family visiting some of Acharn Mun's disciples in the 1970s, the tradition became sought after by the nation's elite (Tiyavanich, 1997:289). This interest coincided with a loss of confidence in the 'state' monks: a suspicion perhaps based on mistrust of the government as much as a perceived laxity in the *Saṅgha*. The 1970s and 1980s was a period of growth for the *phra thudong* movement. Indeed by 1988, over eighty monasteries in Acharn Chah's (Mahānikai) lineage had been established in North-East Thailand. This includes the International Forest Monastery (Wat Pa Nanachat) near Ubon which has attracted a number of Westerners to ordain and practice in the forest tradition. In 1977, American born Phra Sumedho, a disciple of Acharn Chah, accompanied his master to England. When Acharn Chah returned to Thailand, Phra Sumedho remained with the intention of establishing monasteries in the Thai forest tradition.[24]

Buddhadāsa (1906–93) was ordained in the Mahānikai fraternity in 1926. After a brief period of study in Bangkok, Buddhadāsa lived a life of a forest monk near his home in South Thailand. He was in time joined by others and a monastic community

grew around an abandoned temple which was renamed Suan Mokkhaphalaram (Thai, meaning 'The Garden to Arouse the Spirits to Attain Liberation'). Currently around eighty monks live there. There is a strong focus on meditation and study, and many westerners are attracted to its English language programme.

Buddhadāsa sought to reinterpret Buddhism to well-educated Thai. Fundamental to his thought was if Buddhism is not perceived as relevant, then it is not being taught properly. A combination of his ability to think 'outside the box', use teachings from other Buddhist traditions, particularly Zen,[25] and non-condemnatory approach to his more traditional colleagues brought a large following and wide readership[26] as well as recognition from the Thai *Saṅgha.*[27]

Readers of Buddhadāsa will be familiar with his teachings on 'everyday language – *Dhamma* language' (Thai *phasa kon – phasa tham*) where he sets out his hermeneutic for interpreting the teachings of the Buddha. Buddhadāsa uses this distinction to argue that many of the interpretations of the Buddhist scriptures in Thailand remain at the 'everyday level' (Jackson, 1988:73), as the interpreter lacks sufficient insight to understand the *Dhamma* meaning. Emerging from his hermeneutical system are ideas such as rebirth taking place moment by moment and dependant on our choices, as well as at the end of one life cycle. *Nibbāna* is another important doctrine that is given three different meanings and has a strong application to the 'here and now'.[28]

Emergence of an increasingly vocal middle class and the quest for democracy

Increased opportunity for education and exposure to Western ideas (either through travel or media coverage) have resulted in a middle class who wish to participate in the decisions that affect them. They want to 'be ruled by people as enlightened and sophisticated as themselves' (Phongpaichit and Baker, 1998:234). The right of the military to overthrow and appoint governments at will was challenged by protests in 1973 and 1976.[29] In October 1973, a massive demonstration of over 250,000 mainly students but also trade unionists brought down the regime of Field Marshals Thanom Kittikachorn and Praphas Charusathien. The military killed at least 65 of the protestors. To prevent a civil war starting, some senior army officers refused to be involved in the crackdown against protestors, the palace persuaded the dictators to go into exile, and a predominantly civilian caretaker government was established (Political Repression in Thailand, undated:15).

In 1976, former Prime Minister Thanom returned from exile and was ordained as a Buddhist monk in the Thammayut fraternity. His return had been welcomed by the right wing, and his respectability seemed confirmed when members of the royal family visited him (Wyatt, 1984:302). This provoked daily student protests which led to a violent crackdown by the military, 'an army radio station called upon patriots to join against the students and "kill communists!" ' (Wyatt, 1984:302).[30] Members of Nawaphon, Red Gaurs, Village Scouts and Border Patrol Police

attacked students at Thammasat University 'killing over 100 students and arresting 1,300' (Phongpaichit and Baker, 1997:311).[31] The official overall death toll was given at forty to fifty; however, the Po Tek Tung (an independent Chinese burial society) indicated it was no less than 300, and around 3,000 were arrested (Solidarity, undated:18). The military appointed a civilian prime minister but Thanin Kraivichien, a former lawyer, turned out to be 'more authoritarian than any of his military predecessors' (Wyatt, 1984:302).

The military, or more accurately, the National Peace Keeping Council (NPKC) staged a coup in February 1991. It initially received popular support, as the existing Chatichai government was considered corrupt. Anand Panyarachun, a prominent Bangkok businessman and former foreign service officer, was appointed prime minister. Anand made a promising start by introducing many economic reforms. The NPKC, however, 'wheeled and dealed' with key players in the previous government. Charges of corruption brought against many of them were dropped in return for a promise of support for the military controlled government. The army began to produce a constitution which would establish military dominance of the political apparatus:

> They planned to restore the framework of the early 1980's, which had allowed the military to dominate politics by remote control. They were surprised when this strategy ran into fierce opposition from a new quarter: the urban middle class.
>
> (Phongpaichit and Baker, 1998:231)

The NPKC appointed General Suchinda Kraprayoon as the new prime minister after the elections of March 1991. It is constitutionally possible to appoint a non-member of parliament as prime minister, but many Thai were extremely unhappy at the appointment. Suchinda was the army commander in chief, as well as the supreme commander (posts he resigned from to become the new prime minister), and his appointment was viewed as junta rule, similar to that in Myanmar and Vietnam but inappropriate for a progressive nation. Further, Suchinda had clearly stated that he would not become prime minister. This 'about turn' was viewed as a lack of integrity and a tiresome return to old-style politics. The key group who engineered the coup saw themselves as being in the tradition of Sarit (prime minister from 1958 to 1963). This regression to military governance was viewed as autocratic and signally out of place for a modern and educated society.

In April 1992, demonstrations began demanding that Suchinda step down from leadership. Many who organised these protests had been through the student protests of 1973 and 1976. Some had even spent time in the jungle with the Communist Party of Thailand. Others did not have this involvement but were alarmed by the NPKC's clear intention of long-term domination of Thai politics, and found the media blackout and misinformation imposed by the government totally unacceptable.

Samudavavanija (1997:52) is of the opinion that military factions opposed to those who led the 1991 coup aligned with intellectuals, owners of small- to medium-sized businesses, some political party members, intellectuals and students made up the protest movement. He goes on to comment 'this uprising was not so much pro-democracy, as is often claimed, but rather a movement opposed to the possibility of a new alliance of the military and business leading to a dictatorship.' The purpose of the non-violent protests was to force the resignation of Suchinda from the premiership.[32]

> Alarmed by the ongoing violence, and rumours of an internal squabble within the military, the King summoned Suchinda and Chamlong [former governor of Bangkok] and ordered them to stop the violence. . . . On 24 May, after issuing an amnesty for all acts committed during the demonstrations, Suchinda resigned.
>
> (Phongpaichit and Baker, 1995:360)

Anand was brought back as prime minister and led the interim government until elections four months later. By the narrowest of margins, the Democrats emerged as the largest party and were able to form a government to exclude the pro-military parties. Chuan Leekpai, from a humble, non-military, non-bureaucratic background became the next prime minister.

A high percentage of the protestors were over thirty, married, with good incomes and fairly well educated. The mobilisation of the middle class was the most dramatic element in the crisis. The press coined the term 'the mobile phone mob (Thai *mob mu teuh*) (Phongpaichit and Baker, 1998:239). Callahan (1995:90–115) argues that the most significant factors of the 1992 protests are the protestors' employment of non-violent tactics, and the involvement of non-government organisations (who created a multicentred movement thus making the protest so difficult for the military to deal with). In the 1973 and 1976 demonstrations, participants were workers, peasants and students. While many from these categories were also involved in the 1992 protests, and perhaps suffered the brunt of the military's reprisals, the high percentage of middle class demonstrators must not be ignored. There is a wide range of socio-political opinion among the middle classes, but what unites them is the wish to participate in the decision-making processes which affect them. They are increasingly vocal at what they perceive to be lack of integrity and ability in leadership. This applies to religious as well as political leadership, and the media are increasingly critical of not only substandard behaviour but leadership's inability to deal with such behaviour.

Thailand's economic recession (1997–2000)

From 1986 to 1992 Thailand's economy developed as a result of domestic entrepreneurs developing export industries. Non-Asian investors rushed to invest in Thailand from 1992 onwards, attracted by pegged exchange rates, high interest

rates and the climate of economic growth. Much of the investment was in banking loans and not in industries which had made the Thai economy successful during 1986 to 1992. A typical financial speculator's approach during the later period of the economic boom was 'buy something, boost its value, borrow against it, buy something bigger' (Phongpaichit and Baker, 1998:104). By 1994 the boom was over, and in July 1997 the baht was floated and devalued to half of its former value. According to Phongpaichit and Baker (1998:315–9, 2000:2) the following factors contributed to the economic crisis:

- The Japanese economy, which contributed to the success of other economies in the region for around ten years, stagnated and went into decline;
- Lack of demand in the export market for Thai manufactured goods meant a lack of revenue, no re-investment in the export industries and over investing in the domestic market which led to over-capacity and poor returns;[33]
- Irresponsible lending and careless spending – credit was available with little collateral. When western banks became nervous and called in Thai banks to repay loans many were unable to do so as their borrowers were unable to draw on collateral;
- The combined approach of pegging exchange rates (which facilitated trade by removing currency risk) and liberalization of finance (which stimulated investment) resulted in a loss of control over monetary policy.

(Phongpaichit and Baker, 1998:315–9, 2000:2)

In February 2000 the International Monetary Fund (IMF) declared the economic crisis to be over (Reynolds, 2002:311). The IMF had imposed austere measures on the kingdom during the 3-year downturn, and the Thai felt that the surrendering of economic control to IMF was a form of being colonised.[34] The economy gradually improved, yet many Thai have been very negatively impacted by the recession. Countless businesses have closed down, and the collapse of the construction and manufacturing industry meant a huge rise in unemployment. There was widespread disillusionment with the incompetence of the government in its management of the economy, and greed of the large conglomerates. Phrases such as 'build people, not buildings' were commonly heard. Foreign banks and currency speculators were compared to the Burmese invasion and looting of Ayutthaya in 1767 (McCargo, 2001:99).

Traditional unifying values of Thai society

The three pillars of Thai society are the monarchy, Buddhism and the Thai people.[35] In recent crisis points of the nation, particularly 1976 and 1992, the king's 'benign intervention not only ended the bloodshed but also provided

a breathing space to restore rationality and good sense' (Thefravit, 1992:892). King Bhumibol, born in 1927, became king in 1946. He exemplifies the Thai understanding of the king as part father figure, part divine and thus enjoys the affection and respect of his subjects. His political interests are conservative but open to gradual change. In his speeches he emphasises unity, discipline and a working together of each individual for the common good. HRH Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn is the only son of the king and heir to the throne. HRH Princess Mahā Chakri Sirindhorn is loved and respected throughout the kingdom and for many years frequently accompanied her father on official royal duties.[36] King Bhumibol now lives in the summer palace at Hua Hin, a coastal town on the west side of the Gulf of Thailand and rarely appears in public. The Thai do not discuss succession to the throne, except among trusted friends. To be caught talking about this issue could mean facing charges of *lèse majesté*.[37]

The Thai *Saṅgha* is protected and supported by the monarchy and government, and in turn legitimise these institutions. Jackson (1997:77) is correct to point out that the government is currently less interested in controlling Thai Buddhism because its legitimacy to govern depends on its ability to control economic and social issues. On the other hand, governments of nation states such as Thailand can easily find themselves at the mercy of global forces and are not beyond using that which they do not value to retain legitimacy. The Thai press has recently been very vocal in their criticisms of the *Saṅgha*. The *Mahā thera samakom* is portrayed as moribund and some monastics are accused of moral failure and financial impropriety. Repeated criticisms in the press serve to undermine public respect for the *Saṅgha*. The non-standard practice of Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke generates criticism among monastics and laity. This forces the *Saṅgha* leadership into high-profile court cases – situations they would much rather avoid. If the excommunicated Santi Asoke movement were to gain public support, or the influential Wat Phra Dhammakāya were to leave the *Saṅgha*, then the *Saṅgha's* influence would be weakened. A corollary of this would be the further loss of a political tool for the government.

Should the kingdom's traditional pillars of monarchy and state-regulated Buddhism experience crisis simultaneously then that would lead to social unrest. This would be especially true if the economy was also weak. One possible response to this scenario would be a resurfacing of right-wing tendencies among certain traditionalists in the business community and military.[38]

2

THE INCEPTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE WAT PHRA DHAMMAKĀYA MOVEMENT

The fastest growing and most radical group within the Thai *Saṅgha* is the Wat Phra Dhammakāya movement. Their marketing methods are thoroughly twenty-first century and have drawn fire from both the *Saṅgha* and the public as excessively 'this worldly', and consequently inappropriate.[1] It is not only their soliciting of funds that is in question, their meditative practice and understanding of doctrinal issues, for example *nibbāna*, are also highly controversial.

The Dhammakāya Foundation is based at Wat Phra Dhammakāya (Mahānikai) on an 800 acre site in the province of Pathumthani, approximately one hour's drive north of Bangkok. The movement is founded on the meditation practice and teaching of Phra Mongkhonkolthepmuni (Sot Candasaro), popularly referred to as Luang Phaw Sot or Luang Phaw Wat Paknam.[2] Sot was born on 10 October 1885, in Songpinong, Supanburi, 180 kilometres west of Bangkok. His family were involved in transporting rice by barge. Sot was the second of five children, and was 14 years old when his father died. At the age of 18, after an unpleasant experience in which he believed his life and those of his crew to be in danger, Sot decided to enter the monkhood. After several months preparation, Sot 'was ordained in July 1903 at Wat Songpinong and was given the name of Candasaro Bhikkhu (Dhammakāya Foundation, 1998:29).[3]

By the time Luang Phaw Sot had been in the monkhood a few months he decided to focus on Pāli studies. His biographer points out 'the Pāli studies were for him only a means to an end – the mastery of the knowledge of the Buddha through meditation' (Dhammakāya Foundation, 1998:29). The biographer goes on to tell us that the young monk concealed a copy of the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta* in the temple with the goal of devoting himself to meditation once he gained enough knowledge of Pāli in Bangkok to translate these scriptures.[4]

After several years of Pāli study in Bangkok, Luang Phaw Sot started his own Pāli school in the temple where he lived, Wat Phra Chetuphon.[5] Around ten students attended the class in which he taught Pāli up to grade five.[6] Because of a change in the approach to Pāli study and the examination system within the *Saṅgha*[7] Luang Phaw Sot merged his school with some other schools.

On a return visit to his old temple (Wat Songpinong) some 11 years after his ordination, Luang Phaw Sot remembered the text he had concealed, and realised

that he had reached the standard he had set for himself in Pāli studies. 'He was now able to translate that bundle freely' (Dhammakāya Foundation, 1998:37). Luang Phaw Sot discontinued his Pāli studies and began to focus on the practise of meditation.

Luang Phaw Sot's discovery of the alleged meditative practice of the Buddha and his early followers[8]

It was just before a 'rains' retreat which Luang Phaw Sot was spending at Wat Bangkuvieng, the temple of his first teacher, just outside Bangkok, that he had his first breakthrough experience.[9] For three hours he had been sitting meditating on the *sammā arahaṃ mantra*.[10] Although feeling intense pain to the extent that he felt every bone in his body would break, he was able to let go of the pain and detach himself from his suffering.

> Suddenly his mind became still and firmly established at the very centre of his body. He perceived a bright and shining sphere of *Dhamma*. The size of the sphere of *Dhamma* was equal to the yolk of an egg. The experience which filled his body was one of inexplicable bliss which rinsed away all the agony.
>
> (Dhammakāya Foundation, 1998:43)

Luang Phaw Sot continued to meditate and that afternoon, the sphere was again experienced at the centre of this body and became increasingly brighter. He had never heard of this kind of experience from any of his meditation masters but was convinced that this sphere was the doorway to explore the deeper dimensions of reality. Luang Phaw Sot heard two Pāli words come from the centre of the sphere, '*majjhima-paṭipadā*' ('middle way'); this he took to be guidance to proceed between the extremes of ascetic and indulgent practice. As he continued, so new spheres appeared within the previous spheres, each sphere presenting itself brighter and clearer than the last, in which he could see hidden dimensions of himself. Luang Phaw Sot maintained that he rediscovered the true spiritual nature of the *Dhamma* – body, which exists inside everyone, and the meditative technique practised by the Buddha and his followers which fell into disuse. Jackson (1990:201) sums up Luang Phaw Sot's position as follows: 'The spiritual essence of the Buddha and *nibbāna* exists as a literal reality within the human body.'

Luang Phaw Sot sought to relate his breakthrough to the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. He interpreted a phrase which is normally understood as 'contemplating the body as a body' as contemplating the body *in* the body. 'His interpretation was that inside the physical body of a person there exists a series of astral and spiritual bodies of progressive fineness which could be revealed in meditation' (Bhawilai, 1987:4). Luang Phaw Sot's understanding of the Pāli term *Dhammakāya* or (Thai *Thammakai*) is much closer to the Mahāyāna interpretation, than the Theravādin. 'In Mahāyāna Buddhism the term *Dhammakāya* denotes the nature or essential character of the

Buddha in his state of perfect wisdom in *nirvāṇa*' (Jackson, 1990:201). Jackson goes on to suggest that the Theravādin concept of *Dhammakāya* is more of one who expresses the truth, teaching and wisdom of the *Dhamma* because he/she has fully embraced the *Dhamma*, or teaching of the Buddha.

Luang Phaw Sot's career as abbot of Wat Paknam

In 1916, Luang Phaw Sot was made acting abbot at Wat Paknam, in Bangkok. It was initially a difficult charge as many of the monks at Wat Paknam were lax in their practice. Luang Phaw Sot's approach was to indicate his commitment to living out the *vinaya* as rigorously as possible and to call for those who would not follow his example not to impede the efforts of those who would. One evening during a sermon, an attempt was made on Luang Phaw Sot's life by a local villain, the bullet passing through the abbot's robes. Luang Phaw Sot's response to the problem of local unruly children who were disruptive within the temple grounds was to set up a school for them (Dhammakāya Foundation, 1998:61). Gradually the local community was won over to the new abbot, despite his insistence on high standards.

Over the years, the number of monks at Wat Paknam grew from 13 to 1,000. An institute for Pāli study was developed, and of course there was a strong focus on teaching *Dhammakāya* meditation. Wat Paknam was not a temple under royal patronage, and despite achieving considerable growth in ordination of monks and lay attendance, its abbot had to wait for over 30 years until he was awarded a royal title.

Dhammakāya meditation may be divided into ordinary level and high-level meditation. Low-level meditation is practised by many for spiritual purification, wisdom and success. High-level meditation is extremely advanced and has as one of its foci the resolution of serious problems through spiritual conflict (Thai *wicha-rop*) with evil forces. Much of the power that has been gained at the lower level of *Dhammakāya* meditation may be put into action at the higher level. Among these special powers are

> those which enable one to visit one's own past lives, or the lives of others, discover where someone has been reborn and know the reasons why the person was reborn there, cure oneself or others of any disease, extra sensory perception, mind control and similar accomplishments.
>
> (Bowers, 1996:24)

These powers are in line with the psychic powers (Pāli *iddhi*) described in the Pāli Canon as developable by mastery of meditation, especially *samatha*. The texts also warn of attachments to these powers (Harvey, 1990:252–3).

To facilitate this high-level approach, Luang Phaw Sot developed a meditation workshop (Thai *rongngahn thamvijja*). Two rooms were constructed for this purpose and male and female meditators were strictly segregated.[11] The workshop operated all day, every day (meditators working in six hour shifts). Those chosen as

the most gifted meditators dedicated themselves to the investigation and engagement of the supernatural through *Dhammakāya* meditation. Non-selected personnel were not permitted to enter the workshop and necessities were passed through small windows to the meditators. Luang Phaw Sot was the lead 'warrior' in this spiritual conflict, bringing the problems to this elite group of meditators and seeking with them to destroy the forces of Māra as evidenced in the problems that they were trying to overcome.

The standard Thai monastic answer to 'what is Māra?' is Māra is a giant, (Thai *yak*, although the related Pāli word '*yakkha*' means 'troublesome spirit'); death (possibly 'disguised by the mask of worldly pleasure' (Grimm, 1958:319); temptations to do wrong; the Five *Khandhas*, (body, sensation, perception, volition and consciousness).[12] Māra then is a symbol of all forms of unenlightened behaviour that seeks to prevent progress to enlightenment, and release from *saṃsāra*. The root meaning of the term Māra is 'death' (*mārayati*: that which kills) – death referring not only to an individual's passing away but also to continual death after rebirth (Boyd, 1976:155). Māra is depicted as the upholder of false views which arise out of ignorance (*avijjā*) and the opposer of the spread of the Enlightenment the Buddha has passed into (Ling, 1997:51). Māra is 'portrayed as the highest *deva* in the heavens of the *Kāmaloka*, whose meritorious past lives have brought him honour, wealth and prestigious power' (Boyd, 1975:142).[13] Māra is said to dwell on the edge of the sixth and highest sense–desire heaven (Harvey, 1990:35), and has an influence that spreads throughout all of *saṃsāra*. Moving beyond Māra's influence is to move across the stream from *saṃsāra* to the 'far shore' or *nibbāna*. Thus, only those who have seen the *Dhamma* and are overcoming greed, hatred and delusion will escape the influences of Māra.

'Māra is sometimes called the Dark One and associated with "smokiness" and "murkiness" ' (Boyd, 1976:165). The intention then of Māra is to blind people to the true nature of reality, and this darkening activity is expressed by one of his titles – the 'Dark One' (*Kaṇha*) (Ling, 1997:61). Some Wat Phra Dhammakāya lay people refer to Māra as the 'Black Buddha'. One member indicated that Phra Dhammachayo's purpose was 'to destroy the factory of the black guy through *Dhammakāya* meditation'.[14] This is one way of depicting Māra, who may also be described as the leader of the Black *Dhammakāya*, a force in conflict with the White *Dhammakāya*, who seek to overcome Māra's Black Party (Thai *fai dam*) through the agency of Wat Phra Dhammakāya.

It would appear that the select few who engaged in this high-level meditation at Wat Paknam were supported by those who practised the lower form of *Dhammakāya* meditation. To this end these practitioners would concentrate on the purity and clarity of their visualised image, maintaining its brightness. 'Otherwise the power one gains through meditation will be passed on to the evil or indifferent dimension of the universe. Once there, it can be used in the spiritual conflict (*wicha-rop*) to destroy the good forces' (Bowers, 1996:26). The greater the number of people who are meditating at the same time, the more powerful the resultant force. This is one reason why *Dhammakāya* meditation is normally

conducted in a group rather than meditators practising by themselves. A further reason is that it is easier to meditate as part of a group. Wat Phra Dhammakāya members living overseas will make great effort to attend the centre nearest to them in order to be connected via the internet to Wat Phra Dhammakāya in Thailand.[15]

Shortly after the inception of the meditation workshop someone who was to become extremely influential in *Dhammakāya* meditation began to attend Wat Paknam. Chan Khonnokyuung's father passed away when she was only 14. His death occurred before she could ask him for forgiveness for any unintentional misdeeds. She was particularly concerned about an incident where her father, in a fit of rage, cursed his children with deafness for the next 500 births. Chan thus wanted to meet again with him and offer her apologies for making him angry.

At the age of 26, Chan went to Bangkok after hearing 'Luang Phaw Sot had rediscovered the Wisdom of *Dhammakāya* that included the knowledge of heaven and hell' (Dhammakāya Foundation, 2002:1). She served as a maid, and in due course came under the tutelage of Dhongsuk Samdaengpan, a nun from Wat Paknam. 'With the help and advice of the nun, she managed to harness the Wisdom of *Dhammakāya* to seek for her late father' (Dhammakāya Foundation, 2002:1).

Dhongsuk took Chan to meet Luang Paw Sot shortly after the inception of the meditation workshop. Luang Phaw Sot 'recognised in her an innate aptitude for meditation and greeted her with the words "what kept you so long" ' (Dhammakāya Foundation, 1998:96). Within a short time Chan, who eventually was given the title Khun Yai, became the leader of the group of meditators of advanced *Dhammakāya* meditation who practised during the night.[16] It appears that a combination of her quick rise to leadership, lack of ability to read and write and poor social background meant Khun Yai Chan was looked down on by many at Wat Paknam (www.dhammakaya.be Elementary Lesson No.5).

Wat Phra Dhammakāya followers believe that Khun Yai Chan became Luang Phaw Sot's leading meditation disciple. However, a leading Buddhist academic informed me that Khun Yai Chan was not in the abbot's inner circle but just one of a large number of meditators.[17]

There are a number of stories that are still circulating about the achievements of *Dhammakāya* meditation under the leadership of Luang Phaw Sot. Some of these come from the Second World War era when Thailand was occupied by Japanese forces from 1939 to 1942. Many members of the public believed Luang Phaw Sot had special powers enabling him and his supporters to survive. The people in the area of Wat Paknam would go to the temple compound rather than the air raid shelter when the siren was sounded. Public belief was shaped in part by the press coverage given to the sighting by many people of 'nuns from Wat Paknam floating in the air, intercepting the bombs dropped by the bombers and patting them with their bare hands to fall harmlessly in the water or uninhabited areas of forest' (Dhammakāya Foundation, 1998:96). Phra Dhattacheewo, the

deputy abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakāya said in an interview with *Baan Mai Ruu Rooy* magazine:

> The stories they have written are all true. Including the story about the *mae chii* (nun) of Wat Paknam who flew up to push away the bombs (from dropping on Bangkok) during World War Two. . . . You may ask why it fell on Japan and killed so many people. I can answer by saying the power of the *Dhamma* pulled to Japan when the Japanese were bellicose and wanted to make war. That pulled the bomb in their direction.
>
> (Jackson, 1989:204)

Another offered explanation is 'meditators at Wat Paknam used the mind controlling powers to force the planners to change their target' (Bowers, 1996:28).[18] Dhammakāya members are not surprised when Westerners ask them about this story. It was explained to me as follows. Khun Yai Chan, who had developed the ability to travel through meditative power (e.g. she was able to visit her father in hell), was able to travel in her mind to the halls of power in Washington.[19] It was there she heard of the plan to drop nuclear bombs on Thailand. Through the power of meditation she was able to change the mind of the American leadership and the bombs were eventually dropped on Japan instead.

Luang Phaw Sot had a reputation not only as a meditation master and skilled temple administrator, but also as a healer. Many who had been diagnosed as terminally ill were brought by relatives to Wat Paknam and Luang Phaw Sot's advanced meditation practitioners would try to determine the cause of illness through meditation.

> If the patient was approaching the end, his disciples would say so. If the reason for the illness was the ripening of the effects of past evil deeds, they would heal the illness by having the patient perform an act of major merit to escape the clutches of his past evil *karma*. If the reason for the illness was physical, they would use the power of meditation to adjust the patient's internal functioning along with the administration of herbal medicine.
>
> (Dhammakāya Foundation, 1998:71)

In later years, those who sought healing at Wat Paknam were instructed to leave a note for the abbot, stating their name, time and date of birth, and the nature of their illness. 'Long distance healing by mind continued to yield miraculous results in the case of the terminally ill' (Dhammakāya Foundation, 1998:74).

Luang Phaw Sot's meditative approach, and the way he used specially selected practitioners in high-level meditation with a view to combating the work of Māra and curing illnesses, was a departure from other forms of meditation used in Thailand.

Another interesting, although fairly prosaic departure from normal Thai temple practice was the preparation of food in the temple for the 500 monks and nuns

plus visitors. Bowers explains it as Luang Phaw Sot's compassionate desire for the monks under his care not to be dependant on the daily alms round (in Sot's experience as a young monk in Bangkok this was less than an adequate provision). A second advantage in monks not going on the morning alms round is more time available for meditation, or study. Interestingly, the lay community associated with the temple was also catered for. It was not just that they ate what was left over after the monk's meal but food was specifically prepared for them (Bowers, 1996:49).

The first European to be ordained in the Thai *Saṅgha*

In 1953 Phra Thitavedo, a monk at Wat Paknam travelled to England and during his time there met William Purfurst (also known as Richard Randall) an English journalist and Buddhist lay teacher. The following year Purfurst took up residence at Wat Paknam and came under the tutelage of Luang Phaw Sot. It appears that the abbot had a vision for spreading *Dhammakāya* meditation beyond Thailand. During the war he had hoped to be able to spread his model of meditation to Germany. Indeed, Luang Phaw Sot 'had a prophecy that if the Germans won the war, Buddhism could easily spread to Europe and it would turn entirely Buddhist' (www.dhammakya.be Elementary Lesson No. 5).[20] The abbot wished the Germans to win and asked Khun Yai Chan for her prediction. Through the power of meditation she allegedly came to know that the Germans would not win the conflict and informed the abbot accordingly. The recruitment of a Westerner to Wat Paknam should thus be understood in the context of spreading *Dhammakāya* meditation to the West.

Purfurst developed pneumonia in both lungs shortly after his arrival at Wat Paknam, and records how Luang Phaw Sot told him that as well as sending for a doctor, he wanted his meditating nuns to come and meditate for him to assist his recovery. Luang Phaw Sot was aware of the Westerner's sceptical approach to 'the power of magic' but he was keen for the meditation to take place. The Englishman made a full recovery and was ordained as a *sāmaṇera* almost immediately afterwards.[21]

After a short time Purfurst was deemed ready for *upasampadā*, or higher ordination as a *bhikkhu*. Luang Phaw Sot selected *Vaisakha* day May 1954 for the ceremony and Purfurst was the only person to receive ordination on that occasion.[22] The ceremony which lasted three and a half hours was presided over by Luang Phaw Sot and was probably the 'biggest ordination ceremony in Thailand, with ten thousand people present on monastery ground' (Randall, 1990:95). As a result 'Many others were inspired to be ordained' (Dhammakāya Foundation, 1998:129).

During the ordination Luang Phaw Sot gave Purfurst the monastic name of Kapilavaddho, meaning, 'he who spreads and increases the Teaching'. Phra Kapilavaddho returned to England at the end of 1954 to teach the *Dhamma* for one year. He went with Luang Phaw Sot's blessing and the invitation to bring back to Wat

Paknam suitable men who wished ordination as Buddhist monks. Phra Kapilavaddho returned a year later with three men who wished ordination. Indeed, Luang Phaw Sot recommended Phra Kapilavaddho to be elevated to *anusavanācāriya* status so that he could officiate at the ordination of the three Englishmen (Randall, 1990:192).[23] The English monk passed the examinations for *anusavanācāriya* and assisted at the ordination of his fellow countrymen. He returned to England in March 1956 to continue his lecturing and the development of the English *Saṅgha* Trust.

A return to Thailand was required for Phra Kapilavaddho, as he received a telegram informing him that one of the English monks was ill and should return to England (Randall, 1990:195). There was apparently a misunderstanding between Luang Phaw Sot and the foreign monks. The monks requested special privileges from the abbot but walked out of a meeting of all the monks called by the abbot to discuss these issues. Luang Phaw Sot is recorded as saying 'I cannot let this incident pass by, or else they will continue to trample on respect for everything else in the Buddhist religion.... they have to know how to conduct themselves in [this] land of Buddhist religion' (Dhammakāya Publications, 1998:131). The monks left Wat Paknam and Phra Kapilavaddho spent the rest of his life furthering the cause of Buddhism in the UK.

While there may have remained much to do, Luang Phaw Sot must have been optimistic about the future of the *Dhammakāya* model of meditation. The method was well owned by the movement, as opposed to a blind following of a charismatic leader. Those meditators who Luang Phaw Sot regarded to be highly proficient in *Dhammakāya* meditation travelled to other parts of Thailand, and so this technique extended well beyond Wat Paknam.

Shortly before his death in February 1959, Luang Phaw Sot reminded his followers of the need to continue with meditation by saying, 'Our reach is too short. We cannot beat *Māra* this lifetime. We are still in his clutches' (Dhammakāya Foundation, 1998:135). He instructed his disciples 'to continue teaching people to attain the Wisdom of *Dhammakāya*, and to spread the tradition far and wide; since this would help bring peace to the people of the world' (Dhammakāya Foundation, 2002:1). He is alleged to have ordered Kuhn Yai Chan

> not to be in a hurry to die! Don't give up the teaching for the seclusion of the forests! After my passing the others will have to rely on you to teach *Vijjā Dhammakāya* and keep them on the straight and narrow path. If you don't teach them, they will fall victim to the work of *Māra*.
>
> (Dhammakāya Foundation, 1998:136)[24]

During his illness, Luang Phaw Sot was unable to lead the advanced meditators, or train new meditators. Without the abbot's involvement, the emphasis of the temple swung away from its focus on meditation and meditation research towards the study of Pāli and Thai Buddhist texts. Indeed, by the time Luang Phaw Sot died, most of the highly experienced meditators had left Wat Paknam to live in isolation (www.dhammakāya.be Elementary Lesson No.5).

The inception of the Dhammakāya Foundation and Wat Phra Dhammakāya

Luang Phaw Sot passed away on 3 February 1959, aged 73 years. His biographer, writing as a Wat Phra Dhammakāya member, cites the story of a palm reader who went to Khun Yai Chan's *kut* and predicted that she would 'one day have a large number of students and be a refuge to thousands of people' (Dhammakāya Foundation, 1998:137). [25] Shortly after this prediction, students interested in meditation began to visit the temple and came under Khun Yai Chan's tutelage. The group grew 'until the number of students exceeded the space available. Khun Yai Chan's group moved to the present site of Wat Phra Dhammakāya in Pathumthani in 1971' (Dhammakāya Foundation, 1999:17). Here, on land donated by a widow and Dhammakāya follower, the essential teachings of Luang Phaw Sot were practised and the Dhammakāya Foundation (which became Wat Phra Dhammakāya) began.

There were allegedly some tensions between the teachers of meditation at Wat Paknam after Luang Phaw Sot's death as to which of his closest disciples should be the most influential. Indeed, there were differences of opinion as how best to meditate using the *Dhammakāya* model. Khun Yai Chan's and (now Wat Phra Dhammakāya's) approach is challenged by Phra Rajyanvisith as being a narrow version of what Luang Phaw Sot taught.[26]

Phra Rajyanvisith claims that *Dhammakāya* meditation at the highest levels enables the meditator to understand the *Dhamma* through *Dhammakāya* meditation. A prerequisite to operating at these advanced levels is the ability to read the *suttas* in Pāli (Bowers, 1996:68). It is well known that Khun Yai Chan was illiterate. The Dhammakāya movement which she helped found, however, sees no tension between being illiterate and reaching a very high standard of meditative ability.

Phra Rajyanvisith believes that Khun Yai Chan's lack of ability to read Pāli invalidates the claim for her to be the true teacher of *Dhammakāya* meditation. Indeed, he identifies Khun Yai Chan's unique supernatural ability as that of assessing merit

> She is described as having the ability to determine exactly how much merit, and one would assume demerit, one has made by a given act. This fact would explain a great deal about the emphasis Wat Phra Dhammakāya places on giving, primarily money.
>
> (Bowers, 1996:69)

The inception of the Dhammakāya Buddhist Meditation Foundation and Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāyaram

The alleged claims of the followers of Khun Yai Chan to be the only group practising the authentic forms of *Dhammakāya* meditation, coupled with the new movement's businesslike approach to raising funds and recruiting new members caused concern both in the *Saṅgha* and in some sections of society. A group of

people who were practising *Dhammakāya* meditation outwith the newly constituted Dhammakāya Foundation became concerned that any *Saṅgha*-led investigations of the new movement might result in censorship which could include the *Dhammakāya* system of meditation. To prevent collateral damage:

> The Assistant Abbot for Meditation Affairs of Wat Paknam, Phra Bhavana Kosol Thera [Veera Kanuttamo] and an enthusiastic lay meditation instructor, [Acharn] Sermchai Polparthanaridhi [now Phra Rajyanvisith], organised the Dhammakāya Buddhist Meditation Institute on 74 *rai* of land in Rajburi Province. Like Wat Phra Dhammakāya, this institute also has a foundation to support it. It is the Dhammakāya Buddhist Meditation Foundation. And also like Wat Phra Dhammakāya, the institute became a temple.
>
> (Bowers, 1996:67)[27]

The objectives of the institute are (www.concentration.org.)

- Teach *Dhammakāya* Buddhist meditation to the general public who are interested in *Dhamma* practice for purifying the mind and keeping the mind peaceful from passions that cause suffering;
- Educate Buddhist monks on Buddhist theory and train those who are interested in *Dhammakāya* Buddhist meditation in order to become qualified meditation masters and instructors;
- Maintain the correct *Dhammakāya* Buddhist meditation practices, according to the teachings of Luang Phaw Sot, the late abbot of Wat Paknam Bhasicharoen.

Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāyaram was registered in 1991 as a temple, and Phra Rajyanvisith (who had recently been ordained as Phra Jayamanggalo) was unanimously voted for and then appointed as abbot on 9 July 1991. The goals of the temple/institute are achieved by sending out teams of meditation instructors to conduct meditation workshops throughout the country. This gives the opportunity for team members to explain *Dhammakāya* meditation to those who are interested. It also provides opportunity to defend the *Dhammakāya* model to those who are less than impressed with the way Wat Phra Dhammakāya operates. The abbot is a sought after speaker. Currently his sermons are broadcast on radio on Sunday mornings, and they are also televised from time to time. He has lectured on a regular basis in America and Malaysia. The *Dhammakāya* meditation technique is taught at different levels at the twice yearly retreats. On these occasions up to 1,000 monks, nuns and lay people join the monks and novices of Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāyaram. Currently (2006) there are seventy monks and thirty-three novices.

Phra Rajyanvisith's approach is said to be exoteric, in that he refuses to guard esoteric knowledge of high-level meditation. His practice is to teach

these upper level secrets to those he believes would benefit from such teaching. This has drawn fire from some of the practitioners at Wat Paknam. Phra Rajyanvisith is clearly concerned that a lack of openness could well lead to the demise of the practise of *Dhammakāya* meditation and perhaps its disappearance.[28] My own experience, however, indicated that the abbot was reluctant to discuss issues surrounding spiritual conflict between the Black and White *Dhammakāya*.

In the mid-1990s Phra Rajyanvisith estimated that 30 per cent of the movement's followers come from outside Bangkok. At that time those members who lived in Bangkok practised *Dhammakāya* meditation at Wat Saket three times a week.[29] They would only make the 90 kilometre journey to Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāyaram on special occasions. According to Bowers (1995:81) the followers of Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāyaram are people who thoroughly approve of Phra Rajyanvisith's efforts to advance the group's approach to meditation throughout Thai society. Many are medium, or high-ranking government officers, or successful business people. Meetings are no longer held at Wat Saket and members travel either by car or the bus provided for them, which leaves Wat Saket early on Sunday morning, returning in the evening. A core group of around 100 members of the Dhammakāya Buddhist Meditation Institute attend the Sunday meeting at Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāyaram, Rajburi.

The growth of Wat Phra Dhammakāya

The growth of Wat Phra Dhammakāya and its associated movement, the Dhammakāya Foundation has been spectacular. Much of this is due to the vision and charismatic leadership of the abbot and vice-abbot. The abbot, Phra Dhammachayo was born in 1944 in Central Thailand and given the name Chaiyabuun Sutthiphon.[30] 'After his mother's death he was sent to a boarding school whose owner was a member of the royal family who gave the boy loving care as if he were his relative' (Feungfusakul, 1993:75).

Phra Dhammachayo graduated in economics from Kasetsart University and was ordained at Wat Paknam in 1969. This was ten years after the death of Luang Phaw Sot and a year before the move of Kuhn Yai Chan and her followers to Patumthani, where construction started on the temple on 76 acres of purchased land. When Wat Phra Dhammakāya was opened in 1977, Phra Dhammachayo was appointed abbot. Feungfusakul (1993:71) comments 'The lay Dhammakāya Foundation was also established in the same year indicating the group's early realisation of the necessity of having a lay establishment as an important spearhead.' Phra Dattacheewo, however, made the point that there was no intention to open a temple, it was supposed to function as a centre for meditation but 'we got into some trouble for not registering as a temple with the authorities and so we registered but it was not our purpose to start a temple.'[31]

In 1991, Phra Dhammachayo was promoted to the Lower Royal Order. In 1994 he was awarded the honorary doctorate degree by Mahāchulalongkorn University.

In 1996, he was promoted to the Higher Royal Order, and now has the monastic title of Phra Rajbhavanavisudh (Dhammakāya Foundation, 1999:79).[32]

Phra Dattacheewo was born in 1940, in Kanchanaburi, Central Thailand, not far from the Burmese border.[33] Born into a working class home, his parents gave him the name Phadet Phorngsawat. He graduated in agriculture from Kasetsart University, where Phra Dhammachayo studied prior to his ordination. He went on to gain a diploma in dairy farming from an Australian university before being ordained as a monk at Wat Paknam, some two years or so after Khun Yai Chan and her disciples moved to Phatumthani. Phra Dattacheewo provides constant support for Phra Dhammachayo, with whom he is very close (Taylor, 1990:141). Indeed, Phra Dhammachayo introduced Phra Dattacheewo to the practice of *Dhammakāya* meditation with Khun Yai Chan. In 1982, Phra Dattacheewo was promoted to the Lower Royal Order and has the monastic title of Phra Bhavanaviriyakhun.

Since the inception of the Dhammakāya Foundation back in 1970 with around twenty members, the moment has experienced phenomenal growth. Numbers attending the temple to meditate on special occasions may reach the 200,000 mark. According to a temple report issued at the end of 1998, the movement had 881 monks and novices, 116 male and 369 female full-time lay workers and 615 manual workers. It also has 5,000 regular volunteers and can draw on 10,000 additional volunteers for stewarding for mass meetings (*Bangkok Post,* 21.12. 98).

In August 2002 there were 700 monks, with an extra 100 ordained for the *phansa* period. There were, in addition, 500 novice monks. The full time volunteer group are no longer referred to as *asa kalayanamit* but are now known as *ubasok* (male) and *ubasika* (female).[34] In addition, the temple has 1,000 paid officials (*chaonatee*). They commit themselves to keeping the Five Precepts, and fulfil specialist positions such as video technicians, or carry out maintenance or cleaning tasks. After satisfactory completion of a year's service, they are offered a room at the temple. Currently (2006) there are around 600 monks, this number may increase to 800 during *phansa*.[35] There are 300–400 novice monks, increasing to 1,000 during *phansa*. There are around 200 *ubasoks* and 500 *ubasikas*.

The temple complex now covers an area of around 800 acres and is referred to as the World Dhammakāya Centre. The Great Sapha Dhammakāya Hall, which is used for teaching, meditation and large ceremonies, extends to 40 acres and can accommodate 300,000 people. The temple sanctuary (*bot*) itself is recognisably in the Thai style, yet its simple lines are much less ornate, and the black and white colour scheme is an obvious deviation from the traditional red-tiled temple roofs.[36] The temple's foundation stone was laid by HRH Princess Mahā Chakri Sirindhorn on behalf of the king in December 1977 (Dhammakāya Foundation, 1999:18). This indication of royal approval served to enhance the profile of the movement within Thai society.

In 1994, the ground-breaking ceremony of the Mahā Dhammakāya Cetiya (Figure 2.1), a dome-shaped pagoda took place. The inside of this 32 metre



Figure 2.1 The Dhammakāya Cetiya – The embodiment of the Triple Gem.

Source: Kindly supplied by Wat Phra Dhammakāya.

high structure was completed in March 2000. The Dhammakāya Cetiya is hemi-spherical in design, following the architectural style of the oldest surviving Indian Buddhist *cetiya*, located at Sanchi in India. According to the temple, the purpose of the monument is to honour the Triple Gem.

The hemispherical dome which is 108 metres in diameter, contains a sacred image of the Buddha in solid gold, along 'with some relics of the Lord Buddha'.[37] The hemispherical dome is seen as expressing the movement's homage to the Buddha. Cosmologically speaking, the dome is the astral bowl of the universe symbolising *saṃsāra*, and the possibility of liberation through passing the mind through the centre of the meditator's body. This act of *Dhammakāya* meditation is symbolised by the sacred gold image of the Buddha at the very centre of the structure. The dome is referred to as the *tathāgatagarbha*, the 'womb' or 'birthplace' of the *Dhammakāya* (Undated Dhammakāya Cetiya publicity). It is interesting to note that this is a Sanskrit term used in Mahāyāna Buddhism for the buddha-nature within all beings.

One million images of the Buddha cover the *cetiya*. These images symbolise the spreading of the *Dhamma* ever outwards for the peace of all beings of

the world. According to undated Wat Phra Dhammakāya publicity, for 10,000 Baht (£170) the donor could have a Buddha image with his/her name on it placed inside the structure.[38] A larger donation secured an image situated nearer to the main Buddha image. As well as proving lucrative, the selling of images involves many thousands (up to a million) making a long-term commitment to the Dhammakāya Foundation because of their sponsorship of an image. Choompolpaisal (2003:37–8) conducted interviews with four Wat Phra Dhammakāya members regarding a range of issues surrounding the *cetiya*. He discovered that the three members who contributed to the installation of the statues in the *cetiya* were all 'delighted' to have had that opportunity. The newest member was disappointed that he did not have the opportunity. Choompolpaisal's research provides valuable insight into the effect the *cetiya* has on the insider, an area easily overlooked by the outsider. In response to the question 'How does the *stūpa* [*cetiya*] have a bearing on your practice of *dāna* [giving], *sīla*[moral practice] and *samādhi* [meditation]? The following responses were given: (1) the *cetiya* reminds me to practice these practices; (2) seeing the Buddha-images help my mind stay calm and make me want to practice these practices; (3) I feel as if the *cetiya* were the medium through which the virtuous power comes to encourage me to undertake these practices and (4) I feel inspired and delighted to practice these practices (Choompolpaisal, 2003:37).

Members purchasing images for the *cetiya* and contributing financially in other ways would have provided a good source of income for the temple. The *cetiya* is clearly a symbol of the movement; yet one must remember that it provides religious space where insiders may recollect the virtues of the Buddha and be encouraged in their spiritual practices (Choompolpaisal, 2003:29).

The second component of the Triple Gem, the *Dhamma* is symbolised by the raised concentric terrace surrounding the *cetiya* (this appears empty in Figure 2.1). Members understand the outer concentric terrace (which has monks meditating on it in Figure 2.1) to honour the *Saṅgha*, the Third Gem. This terrace is used for novices and monks meditating on special religious occasions. Snodgrass flags up the magnitude of the area surrounding the outer concentric circle when he comments that it is capable of providing space for up to a million meditators (Choompolpaisal, 2003:16).

Wat Phra Dhammākaya programmes

A glance through Dhammakāya Foundation publicity reveals the inroads it has made into a variety of social and career groupings within Thai society. The movement offers training in the area of meditation and ethics. Groups of nurses, student teachers, police officers, judicial staff and soldiers are examples of groups from the public sector who have attended courses. Dhammakāya Foundation trained volunteers and monks frequently attend schools in Bangkok to give training in meditation and ethics. Since 1981, a National *Dhamma* Quiz Contest has been in operation and is used by over 5,000 institutions. This incorporates peace

and ethics education based on the *Maṅgala Sutta* with a built-in quiz component. Children of adults attending Wat Phra Dhammakāya are catered for through Sunday school and crèche while their parents attend the adult sessions in the Great Sapha Dhammakāya Hall.

There are also programmes for female lay followers (*upāsikāratanam*). The first programme of this kind took place as a retreat on the 7–9 August 1998. It was organised to commemorate Thai National Mother's Day, and to dedicate merit to her Majesty the Queen of Thailand on the auspicious occasion of Her Majesty's birthday on 12 August (Dhammakāya Foundation, 1999:34).[39] Around 200,000 participants attended this event, including some from a number of Asian and Western countries.

The Buddhist societies of many of the universities and colleges are led by supporters of the Dhammakāya Foundation.[40] This being the case, students from other Buddhist perspectives will not normally have the opportunity to introduce speakers who are not sympathetic to the temple's belief and practice. Wat Phra Dhammakāya is glad to resource students who request help from them, and the movement has many members who are university students. These institutions of higher learning offer Wat Phra Dhammakāya an excellent opportunity to recruit intelligent young people, many of whom will one day be in leadership in society. During a visit to one Bangkok university, I noticed that there were two Buddhist societies – Wat Phra Dhammakāya and a general one.[41] The 'general' society had a strong focus on the forest tradition. When I asked about its relationship with the Wat Phra Dhammakāya group, I was informed that the *general* society had nothing against the ideas of this group but that Wat Phra Dhammakāya members preferred to meet by themselves. I tried to visit the Wat Phra Dhammakāya group but found the meeting room vacant.

The *Dhammadāyāda* Training Programme was inaugurated in 1972 as an Eight Precept retreat for students, lasting for 15–30 days.[42] In 1979, students who successfully completed the first month of the training were selected for temporary ordination. Students in tertiary education may apply to be considered for the *Dhammadāyāda* programme which begins with four days military style training conducted by members of the Thai army. This partnership with the military has allayed suspicions that the movement posed a security threat (*Bangkok Post,* 22.3.00). The initial military style training is followed by a period of intense spiritual training where trainees observe the Eight Precepts. They live the life of a forest monk, sleeping outside under an umbrella with an attached mosquito net.[43] During this period there is a strong concentration on *Dhammakāya* meditation and many students report unusual psychic experiences (Jackson, 1990:210). The ordination of students who are specially selected takes place at Wat Benjamabophit (also known as the Marble Temple) and the newly ordained monks continue their ascetic practices for another month before disrobing.[44] After disrobing, students usually continue to be involved with activities at Wat Phra Dhammakāya.

A Sunday visit to Wat Phra Dhammakāya on 4.2.00

Buses leave various parts of Bangkok to travel to Wat Phra Dhammakāya which is located on 800 acres of land belonging to the Dhammakāya Foundation, some 35 kilometres north of the city centre. Regular attenders at the temple are readily identified as they wear white clothes.[45] This 'uniform' has three functions:

- It provides a heightened feeling of belonging;
- It allows the poor to appear well dressed;
- It is restful on the eyes, 200,000 people in a variety of styles and colours would jar the eyes. The overall effect of each person wearing white is one of order, an ambience the temple is keen to create. More recently, many members have taken to wearing white tee-shirts with large *Dhammakāya* motifs. This has created a less 'restful' look.

A couple in their late thirties invited me to join with them in their activities before finding a place in the Great *Sapha* Hall. They took me to the shrine of Luang Phaw Sot where they paid homage and spent 10 minutes in meditation before placing a donation in an offering box. This was for them an opportunity to prepare themselves mentally before the meditation led by Phra Dhammachayo. It was also an opportunity for them to focus again on the teachings and values of the founder of the movement. The couple then took me to the shrine of Khun Yai Chan where they paid homage to the movement's 'maternal figure'. This was poignant as Khun Yai Chan had passed away some four months previously.[46] Before passing me on to the information desk, the couple took me to the air conditioned shop which has a good stock of tapes, books, images (especially of crystal spheres) and white outfits to wear.

The information desk escorted me to 'Pole 17', this is the reception/information area for foreigners and is staffed with volunteers who speak English. A retired Chinese/Thai gentleman made me very welcome and supplied me with some of the English literature that was on hand. He went on to explain that he had started attending the temple 2 years previously as a result of the negative press it was receiving. He liked what he saw and had been attending ever since. Although he had never seen the crystal sphere as a result of his meditation, he found the practice gave him great peace.

By 10 am the monks were sitting in the meditative position on a tiered platform which has a golden sphere as its focal point. A life-like statue of Luang Phaw Sot is located under the sphere. When everything was ready, Phra Dhammachayo and Phra Dattacheewo arrived by limousine, driving the last 50 metres through a guard of honour made up of female volunteers. The two leaders took up position under the statue of Luang Phaw Sot.

Being the first Sunday of the month, a crowd of 20,000 had gathered, and were sitting in rows. Attention to detail and order is remarkable. For example, shoes were left at the edge of the carpet that the meditators sat on, all pointing the same

way and placed the same distance apart. Volunteers walked around keeping an eye on things and would rearrange any shoes that were slightly out of line. Another interesting feature was the good behaviour of the children present. There were quite a number of families with three generations present. Phra Dhammachayo seeks to bring people into the temple from the shopping malls, believing it to be far more beneficial for people to meditate than to shop. There was a good mix of ages, and a high percentage of people in their twenties and thirties. This is unusual as traditional Thai temples are mainly attended by the elderly.

After the traditional chanting took place, Phra Dhammachayo led the congregation in a one hour meditation. The excellent sound system and large number of colour TV monitors mean that despite the distance from the speaker no one feels removed from the events of the meeting. Volunteers carrying ‘walkie-talkies’ kept an eye on the congregation, offering help if required. One volunteer instructed me not to take pictures!

Being the first Sunday of the month, the Phra Dhammachayo led the monks and laity in the ritual of presenting the artistically arranged fruit around the bottom of the dais to the Buddhas (past, present and future) in *nibbāna*.[47] This understanding of *nibbāna* as being a distinct place where Buddhas exist and have self-awareness is a controversial belief in Thai Buddhism.

After the presenting of food to the Buddhas was complete, the members went into their small groups for lunch. Members eat at different locations throughout the temple complex but the vast majority seemed to bring food which they shared in their small groups. I was invited to join a small group for lunch. The group contained two female *ubasika* (full time lay personnel), one of them was studying for an MA in Buddhist studies at Chulalongkorn University, and was sympathetic to my research project.

After lunch I was impressed to see the monks going round the various groups encouraging the people in their various activities and answering their questions. The respect practising Buddhists show towards monks is much greater than the Protestant Christians’ approach towards their minister. The Asian concept of teacher–student relationship where respect is shown towards the teacher, and commitment given by the teacher to the student is partly responsible for this.

The afternoon programme started with an introduction to some of the Westerners who were studying meditation at the temple. This was followed by a report from an English monk who was pioneering the work of the Dhammakāya Foundation in Belgium. The abbot resumed his position on the dais and led the congregation in another meditation. When this was completed, devotees who wished to donate towards the laying of a granite floor around the recently constructed *cetiya* went forward to make their offerings. I was informed that those who participated made donations of 4,000 Baht each (£67). The suggested figure in the publicity was 5,000 (£83) Baht, and was said to be sufficient to pay for a square metre of flooring for the outer concentric terrace surrounding the *ceita* which would be used for monks and novices to meditate

during important religious ceremonies.[48] After making their donation, donors had their fingerprints taken so as they may be recorded on the flooring. The publicity indicated

> Each square metre block of the floor will be signified by the thumb print of its patron. These patrons will be moved with a sense of pride and joy whenever they record the magnitude of their generosity in becoming patrons to the amphitheatre. In addition, they may rejoice in their merit each and every time someone comes to be the benefactor of this remarkable facility.
>
> ('Create History with your Own Thumb Print', undated publicity)

Phra Dhammachayo announced that the funeral service of Khun Yai Chan had not yet being finalised and an announcement would be made.[49] However, a piece of gold cloth was being created for the occasion as a mark of Wat Phra Dhammakāya's respect and gratitude for her life and all that she had done for the temple. Devotees were invited to come forward and donate to this cause. Clearly, the congregation were prepared for this and individuals and groups came forward to hand over sealed envelopes to monks who handed over a memento to each donor. A feature of this offering was the joy with which the donation was handed over.[50] The giver (*dāyaka*) often has an enjoyable or moving experience, made stronger by the slightly formalised, or ritual context in which *dāna* usually occurs. In Buddhist theory this is a short-lived experience of a higher state – a foretaste of later stages of the path (Cousins, 1997:395).

The rest of the afternoon was taken over with a three and a half hour ceremony for Khun Yai Chan. Her coffin, referred to as 'her house', was on the stage in a smaller hall. The first monk who spoke pointed out that although Khun Yai Chan could neither read nor write, she was committed to helping people, and for 30 years looked after the temple she had helped found. The second monk who preached was Phra Dattacheewo. In a very well crafted sermon, excellently delivered, he reminded the congregation that Khun Yai Chan was clean and tidy and loved order, just like a soldier, and she loved these things in a deep way.

Sunday visits to Wat Phra Dhammakāya on 25.8.02 and 1.9.02

On these two Sundays I was able to engage in informal conversations with monks and lay people at the temple. I was privileged to be granted an audience with Phra Dattacheewo.[51] In our conversation about meditation, the acting abbot explained his understanding of meditation and the inner light it brings through the use of the *Gaṇakamoggallāna Sutta* (*Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 1995:874–9). He wished to demonstrate that his approach to meditation had a scriptural basis, and explained that his movement had nothing to do with Santi Asoke, as he believed their practices were not founded on the Theravādin

scriptures. Phra Dattacheewo indicated he wished to see the *Dhammakāya* meditation spread beyond Thailand so that it could be used by people of all faiths, or no faith.

A middle-aged dentist informed me that she was particularly happy that day as she was going to donate 30,000 Baht (£500) to the *cetiya* fund for Khun Yai Chan. She invited me to watch her present Phra Dattacheewo with the donation and thus participate in her act of merit making. This lady went on to explain that *Dhammakāya* meditation was a quick way to purify the mind. She indicated that a mind could be generated to a high level of purity and power and used to benefit others. She cited the example of an ill person seeking out someone with skills in higher meditation. Assuming the sick person keeps the Five Precepts he/she may be cured through the power generated by the advanced meditator. After consulting with others, she indicated that higher meditation around the clock was not carried out at Wat Phra Dhammakāya, as it was in the days of Luang Phaw Sot.

The following day I discussed this issue with Phra Nicholas who confirmed the non-practice of higher meditation around the clock. He indicated that there were those who were capable of high-level meditation but the Dhammakāya Foundation were in the phase of developing, teaching and organising its people. The media had made life incredibly difficult for the movement for several years and there was no opportunity to develop in this area. Phra Nicholas also indicated that Phra Dhammachayo intended to take up the development of higher meditation by his 60th birthday, in 2004.[52]

The first Sunday of the month draws the highest number of members to the temple. This is due to the special ceremony of making an offering of food to the Buddhas in *nibbāna*. It appeared to me that numbers were down on the previous visit I made on a first Sunday of the month (4.2.00), when attendance on that occasion was confirmed at 20,000. Raised platforms used by monks for sitting on while meditating were left in the area used for the congregation. This had the effect of masking the smaller attendance at the temple. On these last two visits to Wat Phra Dhammakāya, I observed an increased number of poorer people attending than during my visits in 2001. This may have been due to a number of buses visiting from less affluent areas in the provinces. Bussing in people from further afield may have been an attempt to improve the poorer attendances on Sundays other than the first Sunday of each month.

On the afternoon of 1.9.02 an amulet making ceremony took place and all attendees were invited to participate in the ceremony. Monks initiated the ceremony but many thousands of attendees queued up to press the plaster with the appropriate seal. This merit making activity was conspicuous by no financial contribution being made by those who participated in the ceremony.

That afternoon, Phra Dhammachayo concluded a session of meditation by the chanting of taking refuge in the Triple Gem. In addition to taking refuge in the Buddha, *Dhamma* and the *Saṅgha* the congregation added a fourth gem by taking refuge in *ñāṇa*, (Pāli 'inner knowledge'). This 'addition' is apparently

common practice at Wat Phra Dhammakāya. It does not, however, occur at traditional Thai Temples. This is an example of the temple using a term in an unusual manner, thus creating the impression that they know more and have a more advanced practice than the mainstream.[53]

Sunday visits to Wat Phra Dhammakāya in August and September 2005

I had the opportunity to spend four consecutive Sundays at the temple and attend weekly activities. The first Sunday of the month service (4.9.05) was well attended by around 18,000 members. On the other occasions I estimated attendances of no more than 4,000 members. It was interesting to note on one of these afternoons that two families came forward and bequeathed land (5 and 11 *rai*) to Phra Dhammachayo to do with as he wished, including selling the land and using the proceeds as he saw fit.[54] On one of the Sunday afternoons, Phra Dhammachayo called for members to make donations for the purchasing of medicines for monks. He indicated that this was an important service, not only for their monks but also for those in other monasteries. Phra Dhammachayo mentioned that merit from this activity would happen at the point of deciding to give to the medicine gift fund.

My August and September visits occurred during the *phansa* period. Part of the Wat Phra Dhammakāya tradition for the *phansa* period involves a different cell group (*kalyānamitra*, or 'good friend' group) each Sunday afternoon lighting a large gas flame emitting from a giant candle. This ceremony marks the start of the afternoon programme. It involves a procession through the temple after all the monks are in position and like all Wat Phra Dhammakāya activities it is choreographed to a very high standard. The last event of the Sunday programme is usually a memorial service for Khun Yai Chan and a further meditation session. This takes place in the hall that houses Khun Yai Chan's relics. Wat Phra Dhammakāya members refer to the remains of Khun Yai as relics, not ashes. The bones of an enlightened person on cremation allegedly crystallise rather than turn to ash. The emotional/spiritual bond between members and Khun Yai is clearly viewed as important to foster. One example of this is the playing of a music video which has children laughing and singing 'She has not gone far from us – she is still with us.' Wat Phra Dhammakāya members believe that Khun Yai Chan is in Dusit (Pāli *Tusita*) – the fourth level of a 'sense-desire' heaven. This is where Luang Phaw Sot, Tara and Kuan Im[55] are understood to exist, indeed, it is 'the realm in which *Bodhisattas* spend their penultimate life, and in which Metteyya now dwells'(Harvey, 1990:35).[56] Thus, Khun Yai Chan and Luang Phaw Sot, although both departed from this life, are available to assist those who look to them for help.

Continuing growth but increasing public controversy

To an extent, controversy was associated with Wat Phra Dhammakāya from its early days and for a variety of reasons. For example, it was accused of holding

weapons and mobilising a massive following for a political force. This may well have been the result of the temple's request for the military to come in and deliver military style training to students who wished to participate in the spiritual development programme. The vice-abbot, Pha Dattacheewo replied that 'there was no need for such concern because his temple's greatest fear was becoming the tool of politicians. . . . and political involvement was inappropriate for monks and that the temple had no connection with political parties' (*Bangkok Post,* 4.5.87). In the same newspaper article, Phra Dattacheewo is reported to have indicated that 'the temple plans to set up offices in every province this year and mobilise at least 1,000,000 people to meditate at the temple as part of his Majesty the King's birthday celebration'.

A second area of negative publicity for the movement was caused by protests from the tenant farmers who were still farming the land when Wat Phra Dhammakāya bought the land some 18 years previously. According to news articles (*Bangkok Post* of 9, 10 and 19.11.88), each family was offered the equivalent of 70,000 Baht (£1,170) per *rai* by the temple to move. Those farmers whose leases did not expire were allowed to stay until their leases expired. Phra Dattacheewo indicated that only seven families had turned down the offer of compensation and refused to leave. Some 200 families, however, raised the profile of the movement's purchasing of the vast amount of land by threatening to commit suicide and set fire to the temple.

Former Prime Minister, Kukrit Pramoj criticised Wat Phra Dhammakāya over what he called the temple's 'expansionist design and indulgence in materialistic luxury'. Writing in his Soi Suan Phlu column in the *Siam Rath* newspaper, he asked 'How is it that [Wat Phra Dhammakāya] has such a great deal of money to purchase 2,000 rai [of land] while land is so expensive?'[57] He went on to comment, 'Selling a religious pleasure is a strange and new thing. It has the potential to make huge money.' Kukrit Pramoj indicated early action against Wat Phra Dhammakāya was needed lest Buddhism go into decline in Thailand (*Bangkok Post,* 20.7.88). One senior monk, Phra Padet, indicated that had Wat Phra Dhammakāya not purchased the land it would have gone to developers and would have been turned into golf courses or housing estates. The monk said 'People should have thanked the monks for saving the huge plot of land . . . The Christians have the Vatican, and the Muslims have Mecca, but we Buddhists do not have one pilgrimage centre yet' (*Bangkok Post,* 11.8.88).

In 1990, an article in the *Bangkok Post* (6.7.90) indicated that the Dhammakāya Foundation property was valued at 10,000 million Baht (£142.28 million) and the group had a monthly income of 10–20 million Baht (£142,857–285,714). The *Thod Kathin* ceremony (offering robes to monks at the end of the three month 'rains' retreat) of 1992 was said to have brought 400 million Baht (£5,714,000) in donations to the temple.[58] 'The large sum of money donated by the followers was played down by temple officials who said that such a big temple like Wat Phra Dhammakāya needs such funds to keep its activities going' (*Bangkok Post,* 2.11.92).

For the next six years Wat Phra Dhammakāya managed to keep out of the media spotlight. One possible reason for this was the growing economy within Thailand. The economic downturn in 1997 and the subsequent financial hardships (ruin, in many cases) highlighted the vast amounts of money that had been donated to Wat Phra Dhammakāya, and the temple's continued call for giving. The Deputy Education Minister, Arkom Engehuan inspected the temple and as a result, the abbot of Wat Yan Nawa was appointed to find out if Wat Phra Dhammakāya was guilty of religious misconduct (*Bangkok Post,* 27.11.98). A telephone line was set up to gather information from the public (referred to as a 'hope line'). Most of the callers tended to be Wat Phra Dhammakāya supporters. Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai urged the critics of the temple to be restrained lest Buddhism be damaged. A fifteen-member civilian panel was formed to speed up investigations, as a report was to be forwarded to the *Saṅgha* for judgement by the end of January 1999 (*Bangkok Post,* 1.12.98).

While merit making is part of Buddhist practice, it was the scale with which it occurred at Wat Phra Dhammakāya that caused such concern. Supaj Dontrakul of the Social Science Institute indicated that in this situation merit was being marketed as some kind of commodity which could be exchanged for money. He went on to comment, 'This goes against the will of Buddhism in which merit should be done for pure reasons and be willingly done' (*Bangkok Post,* 27.11.98). In the same article, Phra Mahā Chanya Suthiyano of Wat Umong in Chiang Mai acknowledged the good the temple did, yet pointed out 'that many of its teachings end with "merit making" which, by its meaning, is to give as much money as possible. Why do people have to give so much in donations in order to gain merit?'

Wat Phra Dhammakāya was perceived by critically aware members of the public as trying to secure political legitimacy through the mass ordination of novices on the occasion of the King's 72nd birthday in 1999.[59] The temple claimed 150,000 attended the ceremony which enjoyed two-hour coverage by TV Channels 5 and 11. The positive media coverage conveyed the impression that the movement was well accepted by society, while in fact it was under investigation (*Bangkok Post,* 2.2.99).

Phra Prommolee, head of the investigation unit was reported to be planning discussions with Phra Dhammachayo to convince him that the orthodox concept of *nibbāna* was selflessness. The senior monk indicated he wished Wat Phra Dhammakāya to give up its status as a temple and become a centre for meditation (*Bangkok Post,* 10.2.99). Thailand's highly regarded scholar monk, Phra Dhammapiṭaka sought to identify Wat Phra Dhammakāya's position as heretical by commenting 'In all Buddhist scriptures, both the *Tipiṭaka* and the commentaries, there is no evidence that *nibbāna* is *atta*. But there is much evidence [that] *nibbāna* is *anattā*.... The Buddha taught that *nibbāna* is a state free of defilement, and being non-self'(*Bangkok Post,* 19.2.99). The scholar-monk took the view that *āyatananibbāna*, the term used by Wat Phra Dhammakāya to describe the location of all enlightened beings, and which may be visited temporarily by those who have the ability to practice *Dhammakāya* meditation at the highest

level was erroneous. He thought that the term was simply another way of expressing the extinguishing of the fires of greed, hatred and delusion. Indeed, Phra Dhammapiṭaka (1998:80–6) comments that there is a lot of speculation about these issues and the important issue is not to define *nibbāna* for others but to look into oneself to see if defilements are decreasing. Phra Dhammapiṭaka's book, *The Case of Dhammakāya* drew fire from the movement it sought to critique. A Wat Phra Dhammakāya member using the penname Dr Ben Barakul produced a series of books which accused Phra Dhammapiṭaka of 'being a communist sympathiser and part of a Christian conspiracy to destroy Buddhism in Thailand'. These books had strong financial backing and were distributed to temples nationwide. Police confiscated these books from stores and 'issued an arrest warrant for the author, Ben Barakul, on a charge of defamation. However, as it is a pseudonym, police have been unable to locate him' (*Bangkok Post,* 17.1.00).

Former monastic and well-respected Buddhist scholar and writer Professor Sathiarapong Rachabandit also criticised the teachings and practices of Wat Phra Dhammakāya. Threats were allegedly made on his life by temple supporters by telephone and also in a letter to the *Matichon* newspaper. As a result two Special Branch policemen were detailed to guard Professor Rachabandit and his family at their house in the Bang Kruay district of Bangkok. A petrol bomb was thrown into the compound of Professor Rachabandit's house around midnight of 1 March 1989. 'The attack caused no injury but the bonnet of a car and front tyre were damaged and smoke blackened a wall . . . Police believe the attack was meant as a threat' (*Bangkok Post,* 2.3.89). Professor Rachabandit indicated that the attack had been carried out by experienced operators and no one had been arrested in connection with the incident.[60] This event was widely reported and understandably created negative press for Wat Phra Dhammakāya.

The greatest damage done to Wat Phra Dhammakāya was caused by donations to Phra Dhammachayo of approximately 1,700 *rai* (approximately 2.7 square kilometres) of land in fifteen provinces. The Supreme Patriarch of the Thai *Saṅgha* ordered the disrobing of Phra Dhammachayo, the abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakāya for serious offences against the monkhood (*Bangkok Post,* 30.4.99). The article went on to state that these offences were the distortion of the *Dhamma*, falsely claiming there to be flaws in the *Tipiṭaka* and refusing to transfer to the temple properties acquired while being a monk. It would be possible for the *Saṅgha* Council 'to exercise its power under Provision 21 of the *Saṅgha* regulation to temporarily expel Phra Dhammachayo from the monkhood, or apply Provision 24 to remove him as abbot of the temple on the grounds of causing disunity within the clergy' (*Bangkok Post,* 22.5.99). While the Religious Affairs department wished to charge Phra Dhammachayo with embezzlement and have him defrocked as soon as possible, the police interrogators took a different view. They 'found no valid reason to charge Phra Dhammachayo with embezzlement because he had obtained through donations. His disciples had bought the land and donated it to the abbot unconditionally' (*Bangkok Post,* 29.6.99).

Phra Sumethaporn, the monk in charge of Phatum Thani, the region in which Wat Phra Dhammakāya is located, was heavily criticised over his perceived reluctance to consider the ecclesiastical charges against Phra Dhammachayo, and his deputy Phra Dattacheewo. An aide of the region's chief monk defended his superior by stating 'the process had been slow because the chief monk of Pathum Thani could not decide whether the charges against the abbot and his deputy should be considered separately' (*Bangkok Post,* 1.7.99). The next issue of the *Bangkok Post* indicated that the region's chief monk was to accept the charges made against the two leaders of Wat Phra Dhammakāya.

Phra Dhammachayo and Phra Dattacheewo were summoned to appear before Phra Sumethaporn, the chief monk of the Phatum Thani region. Security arrangements were tight on the 6 August 1999, with 350 police and a bomb disposal squad in attendance at Wat Moonchindaram (the temple where the region's chief monk is the abbot). The two leaders did not appear but sent four junior monks to explain that they did not accept the charges made against them as they originated with a lay man, Manlop Polpairin, from the Department of Religious Affairs (*Bangkok Post,* 7.8.99). The seriousness of this situation is indicated by the intervention of Prime Minister Chuan LeekPai, who called for Phra Dhammachayo to surrender to the police and fight the charges in court. Wat Phra Dhammakāya members responded by setting up road blocks around the approaches to the temple. A leader of the Dhammakāya Foundation, Veerask Hadda, indicated that 'the abbot would surrender if Mr Chuan guaranteed he would not be defrocked nor incarcerated'. The abbot had been a monk for 30 years and it would be tantamount to an execution if he were defrocked (*Bangkok Post*, 25.8.99). Although the prime minister responded that he was not in a position to guarantee bail, the abbot turned himself over to police at Wat Chanasong in Bangkok on the next day. The 600 riot police outnumbered the 500 monks and temple members who came along to demonstrate support for the abbot and vice-abbot. After three hours of questioning, the abbot and a close aide were released on a bail of 2,000,000 Baht (£33,330) each.

In an interview for *Asiaweek*, Julian Gearing (1999) asked Phra Dhammachayo, 'As an abbot can you own land? Don't you need to transfer the pieces of property in your own name to the temple?' The abbot replied:

> A monk having land is not against the law [*vinaya*] at all.[61] The criminal charge is that I have been taking advantage of people who want to give land to the temple, not to me. But I don't know about these things because all these things have been handled by my deputy. When the hard facts are discovered by the people, the truth will be there. I don't worry at all.

A month later Phra Dhammachayo wrote to his superiors requesting to be suspended from his duty on grounds of ill health, citing diabetes and allergy as reasons. He also nominated the vice-abbot Phra Dattacheewo to take over on a temporary basis (*Bangkok Post,* 7.10.99). In December, Phra Dhammachayo was

suspended from his leadership of the temple 'pending his trial on embezzlement charges'. The acting chief monk of the district permitted him to nominate a successor. Thus Phra Dattacheewo became acting abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakāya, a post he still retains. Phra Dhammachayo, however, is the leader of the Dhammakāya Foundation and clearly viewed as the movement's leader.

A Wat Phra Dhammakāya monastic indicated that Phra Dhammachayo would not resume the abbot's position as it would attract media attention.[62] The reality is that he does not have that option, as he remains suspended from his abbot's duties as he has not transferred ownership of the land over to the temple. Phra Nicholas indicated that Phra Dhammachayo wished to return the land to the owners but was strongly advised against it by some lay people close to him. Some of the donors are now dead and returning land to their next of kin could prove awkward, as some of the families may not have known that their relatives actually owned the donated land.

The Wat Phra Dhammakāya movement has come through a period of sustained media attention. The negativity generated by the economic recession seemed to focus on the money and land amassed by the abbot during a time of financial ruin for many. While the case has not been closed, nothing appears to be happening. Phra Dhammachayo's removal from being abbot of the temple is viewed by some opponents as a sufficient reprimand. The nation's economy is improving and the media spotlight has moved on.

Some opponents of Wat Phra Dhammakāya indicated that they would wish the movement to leave the Thai *Saṅgha*. Indeed one monk at the temple indicated that the pressure had been so great on the movement that they almost decided themselves to withdraw from the *Saṅgha*.[63] This would have significantly contributed to a further loosening up of heavily regulated Buddhist practice and teaching within the Thai *Saṅgha*. Pulling out of the *Saṅgha*, or a forced expulsion from it would considerably weaken the ability of the government and the *Saṅgha* to regulate Thai standardised Theravāda Buddhism. Indeed, the *Saṅgha* may well have recognised this and not pressed charges against Phra Dhammachayo.

Phra Santikaro in a talk at Cornell University indicated that Wat Phra Dhammakāya was supported by many of the older monks in the Mahānikai tradition, as Wat Phra Dhammakāya is part of this tradition and is viewed as a powerful force.[64] Some of these older monks are resentful of the Thammayut's privileges, and see the potential of Phra Dhammachayo to acquire the position of Supreme Patriarch (Pāli *Saṅgharaja*) of the Thai *Saṅgha* (*Bangkok Post,* 22.3.00). It is also probable that a number of Mahānikai monks are in leadership of temples who teach *Dhammakāya* meditation. Any censorship of Phra Dhammachayo may result in a clampdown on *Dhammakāya* meditation, which they would not want.

Conclusion

Phra Nicholas informed me that a key feature of Wat Phra Dhammakāya was lineage. The *Dhammakāya* model of meditation is held in great esteem, as are the

masters of the tradition. The first of these is of course Luang Phaw Sot, the one who 'rediscovered' the meditative approach after it had 'fallen into disuse for around 2,000 years'. Khun Yai Chan is the second figure in the lineage, as she introduced many people to *Dhammakāya* meditation, including Phra Dhammachayo and Phra Dattacheewo. The third figure in the tradition is Phra Dhammachayo, the current leader of the movement. In this chapter we have examined the development of the Wat Phra Dhammakāya movement by focusing on these key figures.

The inception of Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāyaram and the associated Dhammakāya Buddhist Meditation Foundation in 1991 was ostensibly the result of concern at Wat Phra Dhammakāya's excessively commercial approach to fund raising and recruitment. While there were criticisms of Wat Phra Dhammakāya before 1991, it was not until 1998 that the temple came under intense public and monastic scrutiny. This was mainly due to the temple's continuing call on members to finance its many projects, and Phra Dhammachayo's ownership of land donated to him by temple members. The wealth of the temple and Phra Dhammachayo's ownership of land proved extremely emotive for the public given the context of a severe economic recession and resultant suffering (financial ruin in the case of many). Monastic and police investigations were conducted, resulting in Phra Dhammachayo being suspended from his position as abbot, and being replaced by Phra Dattacheewo as acting abbot. The land donated by members to Phra Dhammachayo remains in his ownership.

Although vociferous in their treatment of Wat Phra Dhammakāya, the Thai press fulfilled their responsibilities to the public by flagging up these issues and keeping them in the public domain. Wat Phra Dhammakāya member Choompolpaisal (2003:12) takes a different perspective when he reports that a number of Thai newspapers expressed their 'regret over their distorted and exaggerated reporting'. Clearly the impact of these issues on the public would have been significantly less had they emerged in a time of economic growth. Perhaps it was the timing of the reporting, rather than the severity of the issues that caused the Wat Phra Dhammakāya 'case' to be viewed as yet another monastic scandal, inadequately dealt with by the *Saṅgha's* aging leadership.

The appeal of Wat Phra Dhammakāya to its followers, and how it may best be understood as a New Buddhist Movement are important issues. It is to these that we now turn.

3

AN ANALYSIS OF THE WAT PHRA DHAMMAKĀYA MOVEMENT

Six inside (*emic*) understandings of the movement – the appeal of Wat Phra Dhammakāya to its membership

We have a leader with qualities of amnāt, ittipon and pāramī

In the Thai context, a leader with status is important in attracting people to a movement, and retaining them. This sense of confidence in the leader's ability to achieve provides a personal sense of well being for the individual member, as well as an individual's belief in what the movement believes in, and stands for. A movement or group which is perceived to have gifted leadership will recruit and retain more successfully than a group which is perceived to have less able leadership yet better policies and aims. There is a degree of uncertainty about life in a culture which has no national health service and other government benefit schemes. The forging of relationships with people who can be of benefit take on a priority in the Thai context that is not found in the more secure British landscape.

The three most discussed aspects of leadership in the Thai context are authority/power (*amnāt* Thai), influence (*ittipon* Thai) and moral stature or charisma (*pāramī* Thai and Pāli). *Amnāt* means 'power, authority and influence' (Hass, 1964:622). *Amnāt* resides in position, and is formally granted by a society or organisation (Conner, 1996:215). Of course, the founder of an organisation or movement receives that status (and consequently *amnāt*) by virtue of being the initiator. Phra Dhammachayo along with Phra Dattacheewo and Khun Yai Chan in the background are viewed as founding members of Wat Phra Dhammakāya. Although forced to relinquish the abbot's position, Phra Dhammachayo is still referred to as the abbot of the temple, and remains president of the Dhammakāya Foundation. Temple abbots in mainstream Thai Buddhism possess a lot of authority in the running of their temples, and by virtue of their authority are able to instil respect or at least compliance in their subordinates. Phra Dhammachayo's remoteness in the temple means he is not seen to be using authority. Phra Dattacheewo, as acting abbot along with a core of monks referred to as 'inner monks' (Thai *phra nai*) carry out temple leadership duties.[1]

Phra Dhammachayo's power and authority are also firmly rooted in the White/Black *Dhammakāya* myth which describes him as part of the original White *Dhammakāya* and an *Avatāra* 'whose words are holy and true and no one can argue with him' (Fuengfusakul, 1998:67). This gives the leader a tremendous amount of *amnāt* and *ittiphon*. The rumours circulating throughout the movement of Phra Dhammachayo's psychic and meditative powers, his remoteness at the temple, yet his communication skills when he does lead in meditation and preach, serve only to enforce to the members that their leader has enormous reservoirs of *amnāt* and influence (*ittiphon*).

Amnāt enables a leader to instil respect, even fear, in subordinates, as well as the general public, when necessary (Conner, 1996:222). In the case of Phra Dhammachayo, outsiders may be unaware, or indeed disbelieve the myth which empowers his leadership. They are also beyond his jurisdiction, and so Phra Dhammachayo has little influence in the public domain. It is, however, completely different for members of Wat Phra Dhammakāya, where the ultimate reward would be recognition from, or a very rare audience with the leader. Disapproval from Phra Dhammachayo is likely to have a devastating effect on members.

Amnāt needs to be supplemented by influence (*ittiphon*) and/or moral stature (*pāramī*) in order for effective leadership to take place. *Ittiphon* is defined (Hass, 1964:623) as power or influence. Cognate words such as *itthirid* means supernatural power, or force, often having a violent connotation. However, in normal usage *ittiphon* is understood as influence. *Ittiphon* 'enables the leader to influence the behavior of others in order to generate personal benefits for that leader....or generate corporate benefits for his or her own retinue of followers' (Conner, 1996:235). A person with considerable *ittiphon* is referred to as a *phu mī ittiphon*. The colloquial term, which more accurately captures the negative connotation of *ittiphon* is *chao pho*. *Chao pho* is a term given to those important people with influence in a locality. The term may have been invented to translate the title of the film *The Godfather*. 'Certainly since the showing of the film, the term *chao pho* has been popularly used to describe rich influential persons who successfully flout the law. The term has tended to supplant the more formal description of "men of influence" (*phu mī ittiphon*) or the more expressive "dark influences" *(ittiphon meud)*' (Conner, quoting Pasuk and Sungsidh, 1996:232). Phra Dhammachayo has enormous influence at Wat Phra Dhammakāya, yet that influence does not extend beyond the movement. Had he preached beyond the temple or published, it would have been different. This lack of outside influence is in sharp contrast to Phra Buddhadāsa and Phra Dhammapiṭaka; scholar-monks whose writing and preaching tapes have been widely circulated and well received. The other reason for the limited influence of the movement is that the Wat Phra Dhammakāya message focuses on its model of meditation.

This leads us to *pāramī*, the third component of leadership. *Pāramī* originates in the moral goodness or virtue (*kwam dī*) of the individual (Conner, 1996:240). This is opposed to originating in *amnāt* which is a corollary of status, or the

ability to exercise control over others. *Pāramī* may be translated as high moral standing, charisma, the sum total of the selfless expression to others of the Ten Spiritual Perfections.[2]

The *pāramī* of a leader is an important factor when people decide who best to follow. People will try to assess the amount of *pāramī* a leader has as this will affect their progress. This is especially true of a master/disciple relationship in the context of meditation. One lay person who practised *Dhammakāya* meditation and knew the three Dhammakāya movements said that the abbot of Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāyaram (Phra Rajyanvisith) could not progress as much as Phra Dhammachayo because his meditation teacher did not have as much *pāramī* as Khun Yai Chan, (the one who taught Wat Phra Dhammachayo).

As virtuous behaviour is directed from the leader to the follower, the follower may respond with a sense of obligation (*bun khun*); thus a bonding takes place between the two parties. Well does Conner (1996:251) comment:

> At the same time, those observing this selfless behaviour directed towards those beneficiaries develop a sense of appreciation for as well as a need to identify with the moral goodness toward others expressed by the individual. In instances when these two parties know one another, their joint review of the moral goodness of the individual in question, expressed through his or her meritorious selfless behaviour, reinforces the perceptions of both.

Phra Dattacheewo gives an example of the above when he says of the movement 'We must build up our *pāramī* to create public acceptance' (*Bangkok Post,* 21.12.98). A leadership style which draws heavily from *pāramī* is particularly appropriate for a monastic in leadership, or as we have seen, a temple within the community. The source of *pāramī* is understood to be a person's merit, character, observance of the moral codes and, to a lesser extent, the person's family background.

The leader's perceived power and remotness does not mean he is perceived as a leader without *pāramī*, rather his status as an *Avatāra* implies that he must have the perfections (*pāramī*) of a Bodhisatta. Nevertheless, to an outsider, the awe the members appear to have for Phra Dhammachayo indicate *amnāt* as the dominant characteristic of his leadership.

We have economic and 'spiritual' salvation

A large number of Thai businesses went bankrupt in 1997 as Swiss banks demanded their Thai counterparts to repay the money they had borrowed from them. As the Thai banks had lent money to borrowers who had offered little collateral, a huge economic downturn resulted, and the days of easy borrowing and economic boom came to an abrupt end. It was interesting during my first field trip (1999) to observe and hear of an expansion of the King Chulalongkorn (1853–1910) cult.

Thai regard this king as the saviour of the nation from the many threats posed by the British and French colonial powers, during his lifetime. Just as he guided the nation through perhaps the most difficult period of its history, so many Thai look to him to guide them through a period of great uncertainty. Nithi expresses the popular Thai belief that King Chulalongkorn was 'reborn in a spiritual realm as a divine being (*thep*), and because of his great mercy for all human beings he disseminates his charismatic power (*phra pāramī*) to aid and look after all those who have faith in him' (Jackson, 1999:266).[3] Thai who have wealth look to someone to help them retain their prosperity. Those who have lost their wealth will seek someone in whom to place faith, to help them regain their lost fortunes. The past years have been extremely difficult for the Thai economy.

It is alleged by Wat Phra Dhammakāya that one will gain financial security by donating funds to the temple. The following seven benefits (according to an undated Dhammakāya Foundation publicity) would come about as a result of owning a Buddhist image (purchased for £170) located in the *Dhammakāya cetiya*. They are:

- Inspiration with the power to protect against and overcome all obstacles and perils;
- Wealth and prosperity;
- Personal beauty, radiance and endearment to all;
- Career success, strong health and long life;
- Right understanding of the world, purity and radiance of mind;
- Forthrightness and steadfastness in *Dhamma* practice;
- Endowment with worldly riches, heavenly riches and the riches of *nibbāna*.

Another approach for encouraging merit making/fund raising for the temple, and securing future financial security for the member is the 'Millionaire Forever' merit-making project. 'Donors who opt for this are promised wealth in every [subsequent] lifetime if they contribute 1,000 baht [£17] a month for the temple's food fund throughout their life' (*Bangkok Post,* 21.12.98). Specific rewards are associated with particular actions, and a sense of confidence created in the donor as to the outcome of his/her actions.

Many 'one-off' merit-making opportunities arise, for example, the appeal on 27 August 2005 to donate to a 'Medicine Gift Fund'. Members also have a belief in the efficacy of Phra Dhammachayo's power of meditation and his ability to bless those in his presence. At the end of a Sunday afternoon meditation session, Phra Dhammachayo concluded by blessing the people as follows:

> May you have safety in your families, success in your businesses and in helping others. May you create *pāramī* and become very wealthy. Whatever work you do I wish you prosperity, and may we have a family of Dhammakāya that will not be separated. May older people think about the families they leave behind and their future. May we all have

> peace in our hearts at all times even if we are sending our children up country or overseas. The *Ti-Ratana* is our foundation so let us think about our merit and our achievements. Merit is about to flow so pray – make a wish for what you want, this is an important action to do.[4]

Economic security is not the only kind of security required. 'Spiritual' salvation from the forces of darkness is a felt need of the movement's membership. Dr Feungfusakul informed me that Phra Mettānando, a former leading monk at Wat Phra Dhammakāya who left over what he considered to be the excessive pressure placed on members to donate funds to the movement, divulged the following information to her.[5] Within the movement it is said that Phra Dhammachayo is an *Awatan* (Thai) or *Avatāra* (Pāli).[6] Indeed Phra Dhammachayo's followers 'believe him to be a messiah and a reincarnation of the Buddha' (*Bangkok Post,* 21.12.98). Prior to the creation of this world-realm there was emptiness but also *Dhammakāya*.[7] There exists a dualism within *Dhammakāya* of good and evil, this is referred to as *fai cow* (white party) and *fai dam* (black party). There was a war between both parties which resulted in the White *Dhammakāya* creating a new world. This was in time destroyed by the Black *Dhammakāya*. The White *Dhammakāya* in time created a new world where everything was perfect. This was eventually spoiled by the Black *Dhammakāya*. The White *Dhammakāya* responded by giving mankind qualities of wisdom, understanding and abilities to use plants for medicinal purposes etc. It appears that the Black *Dhammakāya* sent lust into this world which resulted in mankind killing each other. The present status is one where only those who practice *Dhammakāya* meditation may break out of their deluded state and behave in an enlightened manner (Feungfusakul, 1998:64–7).

This myth indicates that the ultimate goal is the overcoming of the Black *Dhammakāya* by the White *Dhammakāya*, which is viewed as a holy task.[8] The success of the White *Dhammakāya* means man will move beyond his deluded state, both individually and collectively, and behave in an enlightened manner. Wat Phra Dhammakāya seeks the transcending of delusion through the practice of *Dhammakāya* meditation. If a critical mass of meditators can be achieved, then the deluding and destructive forces of Black *Dhammakāya* may be halted. If a sufficient number of meditators practise higher meditation and focus the generated power on the Black *Dhammakāya*, then evil will be destroyed. The more *Dhammakāya* meditation is practised; the easier non-practitioners will find it to discover *Dhammakāya* meditation (the 'lost kernal' or *sudhamma* of Buddhism). This will have the effect of people being more contented and behaving in a more enlightened manner.

Phra Nicholas compared the mission of Wat Phra Dhammakāya to the film *The Matrix*.[9] This film focuses on Thomas Anderson (who is given the name Neo) and his quest to know the truth of the 'Matrix'. Neo is told that he cannot be told what the *Matrix* is: 'you have to see it for yourself'. As Neo begins his search under Morpheus (captain of a hovercraft crewed by those who have been freed from the

simulated reality that is the *Matrix*):

> [H]is world recedes revealing a horrifying and unbelievable truth – he is cocooned in a pod with billions of other people whose brains are all connected to a computer programme called the 'Matrix'. It was designed to fool humans into believing that they exist in the world as it was in 1999. The year is in fact nearer 2099 and the world is powered by machines powered by human energy.
>
> (Archer *et al.*, 2001:5)

Once Neo is rescued by Morpheus from the *Matrix*, he very quickly develops certain powers and joins the fight to release mankind from the delusion that they believe to be reality. Morpheus and his followers' ability to fight the *Matrix* lies in an electromagnetic pulse that disables electric systems. The similarity between Wat Phra Dhammakāya and the fight against the *Matrix* is obvious to many temple members familiar with the film. Wat Phra Dhammakāya led by Phra Dhammachayo (an *Avatāra*) is involved in trying to help people break free from their delusion by practising *Dhammakāya* meditation. The power/vibrations generated by high-level *Dhammakāya* meditation may be used to neutralise the deluding influence of the Black *Dhammakāya*.

The responsible task of facilitating people to see through their delusion, and opposing the Black *Dhammakāya* is said to create a sense of apprehension within the membership at Wat Phra Dhammakāya. The most likely reason for members remaining within the movement is the desire to be saved from destruction. Feungfusakul is reported as saying that many Wat Phra Dhammakāya devotees believe their movement is their 'last train to "world salvation" which makes them all the more ready to sacrifice themselves [work hard and contribute financially] to "conquer the Devil" ' (Bangkok Post, 21.12.98).

The extent to which members believe that Phra Dhammachayo is an *Avatāra* is unclear. Phibul Choompolpaisal informed me that it is not an insider's understanding.[10] I have come to the position that members have different 'instincts' and seek different experiences at the temple. Some members especially appreciate the logic and relevance of the *Dhamma* talks, others draw much from the effect the *cetiya* and other images have on them, others place a special value on meeting their friends and clearly many have a very strong focus on meditation. I have also met members who look to experience the miraculous at the temple and find it hard to believe that they would not believe that their leader is an *Avatāra*. Thus it may be said that there are many insider understandings as people participate in the life of the temple in different ways.

A further reason for lack of clarity in this, and related areas, is monastics at Wat Paknam, Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāyaram and Wat Phra Dhammakāya are extremely reluctant to discuss issues such as Māra, high-level meditation etc. A monk at Wat Paknam indicated that some skilled meditators *may* still be engaged in

higher-level meditation but nothing like the practices that took place under the leadership of Luang Phaw Sot.[11] He indicated that he was not an 'advanced meditator' and was disinterested in, for example, the dynamics of healing, as it was beyond his capabilities. A monk at Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāyaram refused to discuss Māra, or the Black Buddha, saying he would need to obtain permission from the abbot before answering my questions.[12] When I did speak about this topic to the abbot, Phra Rajyanvisith, he gave the standard Thai monastic response as to the identity of Māra.[13] That is, Māra is the temptations within us, death etc. While higher meditation is taught at this temple, the focus does not appear to be the neutralising of evil spiritual forces through meditation.

Two young Wat Phra Dhammakāya monks were extremely ill at ease when asked by a senior layman to answer my questions about Wat Phra Dhammakāya's conflict with Māra. They believed they would contradict the *vinaya* should they respond.[14] Senator Pong Leng-ee, a high profile Wat Phra Dhammakāya member was clearly displeased to discover that a lay man was discussing how the power of *Dhammakāya* meditation could destroy 'the Black Buddha'.[15] The senator commented by way of explanation to me (and perhaps rebuke to the lay man) 'We do not discuss such issues with outsiders'. The lay man pursued the conversation with me later at his club, and said Phra Dhammachayo's purpose was 'to destroy the factory of the black guy [Black Buddha] through *Dhammakāya* meditation'.

Māra is sometimes referred to as the Dark One and associated with 'smokiness and murkiness' (Boyd, 1976:165). The intention of Māra is to blind people to the true nature of reality. This darkening activity is expressed by one of his titles – the 'Dark One' (*Kaṇha*) (Ling, 1997:61). This is one way of depicting Māra, who may also be described as the leader of the Black *Dhammakāya*, the force in conflict with the White *Dhammakāya*.

On the one hand, there is the myth of Phra Dhammachayo being part of the original White *Dhammakāya*, an *Avatāra* coming down to lead Wat Phra Dhammakāya in the conflict against the Black *Dhammakāya*. On the other hand, there is the admission from Phra Nicholas that higher-level meditation is something that is practised very little, if at all, at Wat Phra Dhammakāya. For their own internal and external credibility Wat Phra Dhammakāya need to be seen to be involved in some attempt to engage with the forces of darkness. This was very much part of Luang Phaw Sot's practice, and fits in with the global purpose of the temple, that is, to overcome delusion. It may be argued that *not* to practice spiritual engagement (*wicha-rop*) with the Black *Dhammakāya* is to depart from Luang Phaw Sot's tradition. This then raises questions about lineage – may the movement truly claim to be following on in the founder's tradition if it does not engage in one of his key practices? An outsider wishing to assess which is the closest of the three *Dhammakāya* meditation practising movements to the original vision and practice of Luang Phaw Sot would probably see the use of high-level meditation to overcome 'dark powers' as one of the criteria to be used.[16]

This lack of engaging with the forces of darkness through higher meditation also contradicts the veracity of the myth of Phra Dhammachayo. One probable

reason for Wat Phra Dhammakāya members not speaking about the use of higher-level meditation to overcome the Black *Dhammakāya* is because this practice does not take place at the temple! The practice of giving a picture of a relative who is ill to a skilled meditator in order for that person to be healed still takes place.[17] There is no evidence, however, of a meditation programme dedicated to overcoming the Black *Dhammakāya*. Phra Nicholas indicated that Phra Dhammachayo intended to teach higher level meditation practice at the temple once he reached his 60th birthday in 2004, as by then he would be able to lay down some of his responsibilities. The beginning of the fifth of a 12-year cycle is an auspicious occasion, and, as predicted, work has commenced on the construction of a building where higher meditation may be carried out. This building is referred to as the sixtieth Year Building (*Akan hoksip*) and it is hoped to have it completed for 2007 when it is planned to invite a million people to the temple for special meetings. The unifying of different Buddhist fraternities appears to be one aspect of this project. In a *Dhamma* talk on 27.8.05 at Wat Phra Dhammakāya, Phra Dhammachayo mentioned the need to bring different Buddhist groups together. 'We need to produce a Buddhism in the right direction and bring these different Buddhists together to come up with a unified kind of Buddhism.' Wat Phra Dhammakāya is developing the facilities to host such a gathering.

The movement is also seeking to bring together those from different faiths, and indeed those with no faith. Clearly *Dhammakāya* meditation is the key component in this process. Genuine interfaith dialogue is an important activity for a variety of reasons but is *Dhammakāya* meditation sufficiently neutral to be appropriate for people of other religious traditions? Temple members believe it to be so, yet I remain unconvinced. The religious commitment of those who lead meditation and the 'sacred space' of the temple are both significant. If this were not the case then why do temple members find it more helpful to meditate with fellow members at the temple rather than at home? This model of meditation is informed by a Buddhist understanding of the self, spiritual development and the cosmos thus preventing it from spiritual neutrality, at least if practiced in any depth. This kind of meditation, together with the ensuing exploration of the experience, which may have input from the meditation teacher, requires caution. I know of three Christian Westerners, who, after practising *Dhammakāya* meditation for some time ordained as monks at Wat Phra Dhammakāya. If the desired outcome of teaching *Dhammakāya* meditation is conversion of non-members to the movement then meditation is valid as a form of evangelism. In that case, Wat Phra Dhammakāya should state its intention is to recruit new members.

We see then that Wat Phra Dhammakāya appeals to its members because it teaches a model of meditation where some results may be achieved relatively easily. These may be relief from stress or entering into a variety of intriguing meditative experiences. The commodifying approach to merit making promises specific rewards for particular donations. This has its own appeal to pragmatists in a time of economic uncertainty. There is a success ethos created by large numbers of people attending the Sunday meetings, and the highly organised cell

structure provides camaraderie and support for members. Clearly the movement's aesthetically pleasing grounds and buildings, well-run programmes and university educated monks and lay personnel create a sense of well being in the membership and confidence in Wat Phra Dhammakāya. The myth of the conflict between White and Black *Dhammakāya* and Phra Dhammachayo as an *Avatāra* may create a belief in some of the membership that they are on the winning side.

We have a large movement structured for efficiency and convenience

A visitor to Wat Phra Dhammakāya cannot help but admire the cleanliness and order of the grounds and buildings, as well as the efficient way all aspects of the programme are administered. The presence of 20,000 followers at the first Sunday service of the month, gives devotees the feeling of being part of a 'success story'. This is important in the Thai context where small numbers indicate lack of significance. Recent negative press coverage may well have increased the corporate identity of the movement as members closed ranks to protect Phra Dhammachayo. Well-known Thai journalist Santisuda Ekachai states:

> Urban Thai society is ruled by consumer culture, and the [Wat Phra] Dhammakāya movement by integrating capitalism into its structure has become popular with contemporary urban Thais who equate efficiency, orderliness, cleanliness, elegance, grandeur, spectacle, competition, and material success with goodness.
>
> (*Bangkok Post*, 21.12.98)

The annual ceremonies of *Kathin* and *Makha Bucha* at Wat Phra Dhammakāya are well choreographed.[18] They attract well over 100,000 people. For many weeks before the ceremonies are carried out, a considerable number of members are involved in preparing light and sound effects as well as background scenes. The resultant performances are only possible because of disciplined practice, great attention to detail and superb discipline (Fuengfusakul, 1993:173).

Temple members are proud of their monastics. Ekachai also points out that the Thai public are weary of uneducated monks (some of them rogues), and the lack of screening that takes place before a man may be ordained as a monk. In contrast, Wat Phra Dhammakāya 'monks have university education, etiquette, and proof of religious dedication by having passed the temple's rigorous screening process' (*Bangkok Post,* 21.12.98). On Sunday visits to Wat Phra Dhammakāya I have been impressed to see the monks going around the groups of members who usually sit with fellow 'cell-group' members. The monks spent time with lay membership answering questions and encouraging them in their various activities. I particularly observed the interpersonal skills of the monks and the obvious respect in which they were held by the laity.

Ubasok and *ubasika* as well as monks are required to be educated to degree level. The temple with its underground car parks, air-conditioned carpeted rooms for

meditation, well-stocked shop and 40 acre meditation area has the feel of a huge, extremely well-organised and successful organisation. This is further reinforced by observing the lay staff in their directing of activities and giving out of information. Huge numbers of people in their standardised white clothes all following the same programme further create and confirm the movement's success ethos.

Our way of meditation produces results

Within the Wat Phra Dhammakāya movement, monks and lay people alike are all committed to its practice. The movement provides a spiritual practice which fits well with a busy, consumer lifestyle. Schober (1995:320) offers a useful perspective, '[Wat Phra] Dhammakāya offers its followers concrete methods for attaining spiritual enlightenment in this life and membership in a pristine Buddhist community that promises to restore the nation's moral life, individual peace and material success'. Thai urban professionals are both hard pressed for time and pragmatic. It would be wrong to suggest that *Dhammakāya* meditation is simpler than the other meditation models practised in Thai society (to reach a deep level of proficiency demands considerable commitment) but the benefits of *Dhammakāya* meditation seem to be more readily experienced than with the more traditional models.[19] There is no shortage of mentors around to guide in meditation and the testimonies of the benefits that result from *Dhammakāya* meditation all serve to motivate enquirers to begin. The well educated respond positively to the explanation of the meditation model and the opportunity to test the teachings empirically.

Certain senior figures in Thai society approve of us

Wat Phra Dhammakāya's association with members of the royal family, and senior military officers and politicians sends reassuring signals to many of the movement's members. In 1977, the foundation stone for the main chapel (*bot*) was laid by HRH Princess Mahā Chakri Sirindhorn on behalf of the king (Dhammakāya Foundation, 1999:14). In 1995, HRH Crown Prince Mahā Vijiralongkorn was televised presiding over the *Maga Bucha* ceremony (Songkhla, 1999:114). Others who have been seen to approve of the movement include General Chaovalit and General Arthit, both previous army commanders-in-chief (Jackson, 1989:200). A ceremony to celebrate the king's 60th birthday in 1987 took place at Wat Phra Dhammakāya. It was sponsored by the Thai Army and three leading banks. This 'clearly shows what mighty economic and political connections Wat Phra Dhammakāya has' (Heikkilä-Horn, 1996:3).

Wat Phra Dhammakāya leadership has not been critical of the *Saṅgha* and its controlling council (one reason for the reluctance of the *Mahā thera samakom* to condemn the movement in the recent controversy) and has been careful to comply with *Saṅgha* regulations. Furthermore, the movement is not opening new temples throughout the kingdom; such an activity would be viewed as sectarian. Given its ability to operate through the Buddhist societies of colleges and universities;

its TV programmes delivered through regular channels (internet and satellite); network of cell groups and having influence in other temples, one may argue that it does not need to open other temples! This non-polemic approach to the *Mahā thera samakom* and the *Saṅgha* is reiterated by Phra Somchai, who comments that the movement is not trying to 'challenge fundamental Buddhist ideas or the *Saṅgha* Council's authority'. The monk goes on to say 'We always respect existing institutions in Thai society and never question nor try to change the rules' (Daorueng, 1999:40).

We are a new reform movement

Peter Jackson has suggested that families who may have had connections with a temple within the Thammayut fraternity may now be supportive of Wat Phra Dhammakāya, although the temple is part of the Mahānikai fraternity. This interesting theory had some basis to it when it was suggested in the early 1990s, although even then the Thammayut – Mahānikai division was not nearly as distinct as it once was. While some older monks may still hold strong views about the distinctions of the fraternities, it is currently a historical issue for most lay people. Contemporary public interest focuses on reported inappropriate behaviour of monks by the media, and the perceived ineptness of the leadership of the *Mahā thera sammakom*. Even the process of excommunication of Santi Asoke from the *Saṅgha* which was completed in 1995 appears to be all but deleted from public memory.

Wat Phra Dhammakāya with its association with some high-ranking army officers and politicians, along with occasional sponsorship from members of the royal family, has an appeal to those from a traditional middle-class background, that is, those who benefit from some connection with the establishment. Many of the distinctives mentioned concerning Wat Phra Dhammakāya will clearly be attractive to the traditional middle class. It may well have been that they were viewed in the early 1990s as a new reform movement which would bring about an upgrading of the Thai *Saṅgha*. To an extent, Wat Phra Dhammakāya is today what the Thammayut movement was during the reigns of Kings Rama IV and V. As we have seen, however, Wat Phra Dhammakāya has come in for a savaging from the Thai media. Criticisms focus on the refusal of Phra Dhammachayo to hand over the title deeds of land donated to him by temple members to the movement. Then there are the unproven allegations that the temple placed undue pressure on its membership to make merit by giving to the temple during a time of serious economic downturn in the region. Last, there are the criticisms levelled at the temple's teaching by highly respected monks such as Phra Dhammapiṭaka. The Thammayut movement sought to bring monastics to a relatively narrow understanding of Buddhist belief and practice. On the other hand, Wat Phra Dhammakāya has moved sideways into Mahāyāna-like concepts and forwards into contemporary methods of recruiting, accounting and communicating.

The established middle class are, in general, more concerned with preserving their power rather than with an allegiance to a particular expression of Thai

Buddhism. A *Saṅgha* that is perceived to be well educated, morally upright, and able to address contemporary issues can only bring credibility to a government which it legitimises. A pro-establishment group which modernises the state-regulated *Saṅgha* is a reform group well worth supporting if you benefit from the establishment. Membership of Wat Phra Dhammakāya, however, must have been difficult for many during the times of the intense criticisms of the temple.

Wat Phra Dhammakāya may yet have a similar function to that of the Thammayut movement, despite its many differences. Currently Phra Dattacheewo is involved in assisting the *Mahā thera samakom* in facilitating communications and providing leadership more in touch with contemporary Thai society. While some of the *Saṅgha*'s leadership recognise the need for modernisation, they themselves do not have the creativity and capacity to effect change. Under Phra Dattacheewo's leadership, Wat Phra Dhammakāya offers secretarial help and assistance with communication for the *Mahā thera samakom*. Indeed, Wat Phra Dhammakāya is the only temple within the kingdom large enough to accommodate all of the country's senior monks coming together for meetings.[20] As the years go by, the Wat Phra Dhammakāya controversies will be replaced with new issues, and the movement's emphasis on *Dhammakāya* meditation and size of operations will become more accepted within Thai society. It is interesting to note that a number of the movement's members, both lay and monastic are engaged in postgraduate studies overseas. It may well be that on return to Thailand these graduates will move into positions of influence in teaching Buddhist studies and associated languages. As a result of all of this, Wat Phra Dhammakāya will become an agent for change within the Thai *Saṅgha*. It would not be surprising if many at the temple see their movement as a prime mover in bringing Thai Buddhism into the twenty-first century.

Six similarities between Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Sōka Gakkai

'After 1945, with the coming of full religious freedom and the discrediting of pre-war Shintō and Buddhism in the eyes of many, the new religions grew mightily for several decades' (Bern, 1987:411). Japanese government neutrality towards religious organisations is comparatively new, and one of the distinctive factors of the Japanese cultural milieu is the plethora of New Religious Movements, facilitated in part by economic growth. While Sōka Gakkai (essentially a lay movement) had its inception in Japan in the 1930s, it traces its roots back to Nichiren, the thirteenth-century Buddhist prophet and founder of Nichiren Buddhism. It is therefore more accurate to describe Sōka Gakkai as a revitalised expression of Nichiren Buddhism. Nichiren (and Sōka Gakkai) believe that the teachings of the Buddha found its highest expression in the *Lotus Sūtra*.[21] The essence of the message of the *Lotus Sūtra* is found in its title, '*Sūtra* of the Lotus of the Good Law'. For Sōka Gakkai members 'Nichiren's teaching was that the whole point of the *Lotus Sūtra* was to wean people away from dependence on Buddha's mercy

and to make them reliant on the unsurpassed wisdom latent within themselves' (Wilson and Dobbelaere, 1994:5). By chanting '*na-mu myō-hō renge kyō*,' Japanese for 'veneration to the *Sūtra* of the Lotus of the Good Law,' and contemplating a *maṇḍala* with these words and the names of some Buddhas on it, the buddha-nature, which is within everyone, would be activated.[22] This will lead to the moral uplift of the individual and society. Eventually it will bring the devotee to the attainment of enlightenment. Both Nichiren and Sōka Gakkai believe that Japan is the chosen country for the spreading of Buddhism throughout the world and establishing a universal Buddhist movement.

Around 6 per cent of the Japanese population are members of the Sōka Gakkai movement (Waterhouse, 2002:127). Its International branch (Sōka Gakkai International – SGI) allegedly extends to over 163 countries (Waterhouse, 2002:131), with hundreds of thousands of members overseas (Wilson and Dobbelaere, 1994:11). Clearly how many members constitute a presence in a particular country is an issue here! A visitor to Wat Phra Dhammakāya familiar with Sōka Gakkai may observe similarities between the two movements in the following six areas.

Readily understood teaching

Sōka Gakkai's easily understood teaching is attractive to its members. Yamamori leaves himself open to the charge of oversimplification when he writes 'To the fundamental human quest, "What must we do to be saved?" the Sōka Gakkai member replies "Believe only in the worship object and recite the *Daimoku*, and you will be saved" ' (Yamamori, 1974:5). Yet a simple technique promising inner power and practical results is a winsome feature of the Sōka Gakkai message.

Many, perhaps the majority, of Wat Phra Dhammakāya lay members, live in the 'fast lanes' of commerce. Their capitalist background demands quick results, and they do not have time for a complex philosophy or a meditative practice that does not deliver. Donald Swearer comments (1991:662):

> The Dhammakāya movement's world-view demythologises the traditional cosmological structure of classical Thai Buddhism, but it lacks the erudition of the earlier reform tradition. The Dhammakāya world-view is also highly simplistic relative to the sophisticated and sometimes controversial interpretations of various brilliant contemporary reformers – monastic intellectuals such as Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu or scholars such as Phra Depvedi [Dhammapiṭaka].

Yet as the years have gone by, Wat Phra Dhammakāya's understanding of the cosmos has been developed. There has been a lot of focus on the supernatural abilities of Khun Yai Chan to locate a deceased person suffering in hell, to travel there and bring merit to that person. Then there is the ritual of offering food to the Buddha in *nibbāna*, a practice conducted by the Phra Dhammachayo on the first

Sunday of every month which has led to a distinctive Wat Phra Dhammakāya view of *nibbāna*. This reminds members that the knowledge of the supernatural world and the skills to navigate it lie with the movement's leadership. Part of Wat Phra Dhammakāya explanation of the cosmos is an attempt to commodify abstract concepts. One member took me to view a large metal model of the cosmos covering some 900 square metres.[23] She described the various heavens and hells in detail, explaining how certain hells may be avoided and heavens gained through the giving of specific sums of money to the temple. Swearer is correct when he asserts Wat Phra Dhammakāya's teaching is less philosophical than that of Buddhadāsa and Phra Dhamapiṭaka. However, the movement reinterprets classical Theravādin cosmology in terms designed to encourage members to give to the work of the temple.

Prosperity now

According to Sōka Gakkai teaching, the pursuit of happiness is the goal of human life. Happiness means good health, stable relationships and economic prosperity. This 'this world' message is on target for Japanese consumer society. Wat Phra Dhammakāya also has a high *this world* appeal for its lay followers, many of whom have been attracted from the business community by the movement's ability to demonstrate the material (as well as the spiritual) benefits of *Dhammakāya* meditation practice and supporting the work of the temple through donations.

From a reading of the above one could dismiss members of these movements as excessively self-focused. Chryssides comments (1999:219) that Sōka Gakkai International, 'appears to teach that enlightenment is achieved through desire rather than by removing it', desires and enlightenment being interconnected. Waterhouse takes the view that a practitioner's desires will be more altruistic as he/she becomes more enlightened.

> Early in their association with the Sōka Gakkai, individuals are encouraged to chant for superficial, tangible benefits to prove to themselves the efficacy of the practice and strengthen their faith. As they develop, according to the movement's own understanding, they will change so that the short term, superficial view is no longer focal. The satisfaction brought by the achievement of short-term goals is replaced by a more long term view and more altruistic goals.
>
> (Waterhouse, 2002:130)

Wat Phra Dhammakāya members see no incongruence between pursuing/enjoying a prosperous lifestyle and developing in meditation prowess. The latter facilitates the former. The temple's constant call to its membership to make merit through donations challenges attachment to wealth! Members will argue that the creation of wealth is good for the national economy and without material prosperity they could not contribute so much to Wat Phra Dhammakāya's development.

Excellent publicity

Sōka Gakkai work hard on their public relations, staging high-profile events at which well-known figures are seen. Showing international academics and celebrities in discussion with Dissaku Ikeda, (the present leader), serves to bestow prestige or authenticate the movement.[24] The use of attractive publications, including videos, testimonies of satisfied devotees and TV programmes conveys the impression that the movement is successful and one would do well to join. In 1983, *Seikyō Shinbun* the organisation's newspaper had a circulation of 4.5 million copies daily.

Wat Phra Dhammakāya has similar high standards of publicity, including videos and use the attendance of members of the royal family such as the prince and princess at the casting of a gold image and the laying of the foundation stone of Wat Phra Dhammakāya respectively. The *Pim Thai* daily newspaper, which was declining in sales was bought over by the movement. It has a strong focus on Wat Phra Dhammakāya activities which it presents in a good light, unlike some of the nation's other newspapers.

Building national significance through global expansion

The loss of face brought about through losing the Pacific War was enormous for Japan (a shame-based culture). Shame led to covering up of the facts and a drive towards regaining honour and restoring face. In the Japanese situation, this was orientated towards economic success and industrial excellence. For many Japanese, something more than the economic miracle is needed to restore national significance, as they perceive a national spiritual/moral vacuum. The working towards the spread of 'true Buddhism' throughout the world, referred to as *kosen-rufu* meaning 'to widely declare and spread', and subsequent world peace, is a worthy vision. Japan being the centre of that universal Buddhist movement restores national pride and gives members a goal and purpose for their activities.

While Thailand did not suffer humiliation like Japan, there is a feeling that Thai Buddhism is not what it once was, both in terms of its out of touch leadership and recent scandals among monks. To become seriously committed to the Wat Phra Dhammakāya *Weltanschauung* is to think in terms of the spread of *Dhammakāya* meditation throughout the world.[25] As Luang Phaw Sot was born in Thailand, and 'rediscovered' *Dhammakāya* meditation there, it is reasonable (if you are a Wat Phra Dhammakāya member) to assume that Thailand should be the centre for *Dhammakāya* teaching and practice. For Wat Phra Dhammakāya members, the Mahā Dhammakāya Cetiya is viewed as the centre of their operations. Bowers explains

> Labelling Wat Phra Dhammakāya the centre is essential for high-level *Dhammakāya* meditation as concentration must be focused some place where the power generated during meditation can be put to best use. It should be remembered that the battle of the supernatural takes place in the deep cosmos, but it can be controlled from Wat Phra Dhammakāya.
> (Bowers, 1996:65)

It may well be that the Thai public would be more supportive of Wat Phra Dhammakāya if they were aware of the movement's goal of spreading *Dhammakāya* meditation throughout the world. It may serve to help them understand why Wat Phra Dhammakāya feels such a need to raise such a high level of funding. Phra Nicholas believes Thai would not be supportive for the following reasons.[26] First, jealousy is a characteristic of Thai society. In the words of a Thai proverb, 'you can be good but don't become great', the implication being that you will be criticised if you become *too* successful! 'Who do you think you are, telling everyone how to meditate?' is a common criticism levelled at Wat Phra Dhammakāya according to Phra Nicholas. Second, not only is there opposition to Wat Phra Dhammakāya within the *Saṅgha*, there is opposition from a number of alcohol and cigarette manufacturing companies. They have suggested there should be less emphasis on the movement's preaching on keeping the Five Precepts – an upturn in morality is not good for business. More recently, the temple has had high-profile ceremonies of pouring alcohol away and destroying cigarettes. Indeed, members of other religious traditions joined with Wat Phra Dhammakāya on these occasions. Third, Thai movements tend to be national rather than international. For a Thai organisation to become international, it requires the sponsorship of the Thai government.

Sōka Gakkai's well-publicised goal of becoming a worldwide Buddhist movement has contributed a sense of significance and identity to its membership. It has also created suspicion, and in some cases, ill will towards the movement. Phra Nicholas referred to the Buddha's refusal to allow his disciples to wear boots to help them walk over rough terrain. This meant slow progress, yet the people would not view the disciples as soldiers advancing quickly, perhaps out to attack them. The abbot compared the best approach for progress to the spilling of water – it eventually spreads everywhere in a quiet way.

Just as Sōka Gakkai (known outside Japan as Sōka Gakkai International, SGI) has expanded significantly in the Americas and Europe adjusting its approach sensitively to fit with local culture, so Wat Phra Dhammakāya is beginning to expand outside Thailand. Currently (2006), the movement has centres in thirteen countries outside Thailand.[27] There are five centres in America, including a delegation to the United Nations. One feature of Wat Phra Dhammakāya's approach is that *Dhammakāya* meditation is not taught as a Buddhist practice but as a religiously neutral technique suitable for those of all faiths, or none.[28] A Western meditation instructor informed me that Phra Dhammachayo had told him that he did not wish people to change their religion as a result of practising *Dhammakāya* meditation but rather to become more committed members of their faith systems.[29] This instructor, while qualified to answer questions about meditation, is not authorised to answer questions about Buddhism, as Phra Dhammachayo considers the Westerner's knowledge to be insufficient in this area.

While respecting the movement's desire to introduce non-Buddhists to *Dhammakāya* meditation without converting them to Buddhism, one wonders if this is the best long-term policy for all concerned. A number of monks and lay

people involved in *Dhammakāya* meditation have expressed the opinion that *Dhammakāya* meditation is essentially Buddhist and is only neutral at a basic level. Once the meditator advances he/she is taken into a world and cosmology informed by Buddhist understanding.

A sense of belonging

Sōka Gakkai are especially diligent in reaching the 'lost': those who have *lost* their family ties through moving from the country to the city to work; those wives who have *lost* their husbands to business, or 'another woman'; those mothers who have *lost* their children as the children have left home; businessmen who have *lost* their wealth for whatever reason. Such people have been 'found' by Sōka Gakkai. Identity and companionship is found through membership of the religious community. In Sōka Gakkai, belonging and identity are further developed through membership of fortnightly local discussion groups, as well as occupational or interest groups.

Thai society has many *lost* people who have been brought, or come along by themselves to Wat Phra Dhammakāya. Many have found the companionship, spirituality, and ability to live a morally upright life to be what they were looking for. While not as tightly structured as Sōka Gakkai, the temple does have interest groups, task-orientated teams, and cell groups (*kalyānamitra*, or 'good friend' groups) in which members are encouraged to be involved. Bangkok is divided into eight divisions and there are fifty divisions throughout the country. There are over 100,000 families registered in *kalyānamitra* 'cells' throughout the country.[30] Phra Dhammachayo appoints the leader of each cell group and assigns a name for each group.

Normally members eat lunch in their cell groups between the morning and afternoon programmes. They usually meet as cell groups during the week, and one of their responsibilities is to follow-up new attendees from their area at the temple. One member informed me that her group met most nights to meditate. They varied the venue of the meetings so the responsibility of hospitality was shared between the cell membership. Another member told me that members of his cell group regularly joined him at his house for weekly meditation. In some areas, large meeting rooms are hired, for example the Silom district (central area of Bangkok) where there were approximately 300 members in 2003.

Recruitment to the movement and fund raising

Critics of both movements allege that excessive pressure is applied to non-members to either donate and/or become members. Sōka Gakkai have been heavily criticised in Japan for their forceful approach (less used in recent years) to sharing their beliefs with non-members. This confrontational approach is known as *shakubuku*. Within the Japanese Buddhist tradition there are two principal methods of propagating the faith, *shoju* and *shakubuku*. Nichiren viewed

shakubuku as a necessary approach in Buddhist countries in the Later Day of the Law.[31] He considered *shoju* to be more appropriate to non-Buddhist countries (Wilson and Dobbelaere, 1994:11). *Shoju* 'involves teaching by example without the forceful refutation of views' (Waterhouse, 2002:117).

Earhart (1969:167) comments '*Shakubuku* means to correct one's evil mind and convert it to good.' Hesslegrave (1967:131) prefers the translation 'coercive propagation' as it focuses upon the method rather than the object of the process. This polemic way of operating necessitates a vigorous attack on the belief system of the outsider and a demonstration of the truth of the teachings of the Lotus *Sūtra*. To facilitate members in their proselytising approach, they are 'supplied with handbooks containing quotations from Nichiren's writings and explanations of the Lotus *Sūtra's* teachings' (Waterhouse, 2002:128). These handbooks also contain sample answers to questions non-members are likely to ask. This confrontational approach along with the use of personal testimony of the benefits of chanting have contributed to the growth of the movement in Japan.[32] Sōka Gakki International, the term for the movement outside Japan, take the more irenical *shoju* approach to evangelism. Indeed, more recently, Sōka Gakkai within Japan has moved away from the *shakubuku* model to a more dialogical approach, as it has abandoned the view that other religions are evil. Nichiren Shō-shū, the parent movement, however, has not modified its confrontational approach.

My own experience is that Wat Phra Dhammakāya members seek to encourage non-members to try *Dhammakāya* meditation, mentioning the benefits they have received as a result. The discovery of the model by Luang Phow Sot is explained and there is a clear invitation to try and see as this is an approach that achieves results quickly. Invitations to attend the Sunday meetings at the temple are made, and for those who do not have their own transport, there are instructions as how to make use of the free buses leaving prominent parts of the city for Wat Phra Dhammakāya. A *shakubuku* approach would not be acceptable in Thai culture, which tends to be non-confrontational. Persistence is permitted and there are stories of Wat Phra Dhammakāya members steadily working away at their circle of contacts. Wat Phra Dhammakāya recruited school principals, hospital directors, and other such civil servants, then had them pressure their staff to attend Wat Phra Dhammakāya activities and make donations (*Bangkok Post,* 22:3:02).

A lady shopkeeper described the activities of a relative who tried to sell her images.[33] The relative wished further recognition from temple leadership for her prowess in fund raising. The issue here seemed to be one of recognition rather than any material gain. Certain amulets are presented and worn almost like a medal; they are recognised as a badge of achievement by fellow members.

While both movements grow through the zealous activities (including door to door work) of members who are persistent and persuasive, it would be wrong for someone familiar with Sōka Gakkai to assume that Wat Phra Dhammakāya takes a *shakubuku* style approach to outsiders.

In 1990–91, many of the tensions between the Nichiren Shō-shū and Sōka Gakkai movements came to a head in accusation/counter-accusation, some of

which involved legal proceedings. Sōka Gakkai were excommunicated by the Nichiren Shoshū priesthood on the grounds that they had gone against Nichiren Shoshū teachings (Wilson and Dobbelaere, 1994:240). Sōka Gakkai were able to use the services of a number of Nichiren Shō-shū priests who felt they wished to continue their association with them. These priests therefore chose to leave Nichiren Shō-shū.

Many within the Thai *Saṅgha* were very upset with Wat Phra Dhammakāya. The key charge levelled at Phra Dhammachayo was his refusal to give up the title deeds to land donated to him. This led in 1999 to Phra Dhammachayo stepping down as abbot and Phra Dattacheewo being appointed as acting abbot. A number of the movement's distinctives were also attacked, particularly appeals for donations and their belief system, (especially the nature of *nibbāna*). At the height of the media attack and *Saṅgha* investigations Wat Phra Dhammakāya almost left the *Saṅgha* but as we have seen from the end of the Chapter 2 this crisis has past. It is also important to point out that Wat Phra Dhammakāya has not been publicly critical of the *Saṅgha* and its leadership. On the other hand, Sōka Gakkai members were critical of the Shō-shū priests for their extravagant standards of living, and the excessive profits they made from selling memorial tablets for the dead. Sōka Gakkai statements such as 'inner heart and attitude, not the shaven head and robe determine who was to be regarded as the true priest' were understood to be combative by Shoshu priests, who accused the lay movement of carrying out functions without priests in attendance (Mackenzie, 1995b:12). It would appear that Wat Phra Dhammakāya will remain within the *Saṅgha*, and not go through a withdrawal or excommunication process like Sōka Gakkai.

While similarities have been identified, one dissimilarity which needs to be mentioned is political associations. In 1964, Sōka Gakkai founded the Kōmeitō, or 'Clean Government' party, under President Ikeda of the Sōka Sakkai movement. 'Kōmeitō claimed that it was a people's political party as well as a religious political party and cited the example of Christian parties in Europe, arguing that the development of religious political parties in Japan was inevitable' (Murakami, 1980:154). Despite 15.4 per cent of the total national vote in 1968 and its ambition to be the second ranking opposition party, it became less of a religious political party (Murakami, 1980:156). Wat Phra Dhammakāya is a monastic-led movement and officially has no political party associated with it. On the other hand, the Thai Mahārat Party (Great Party of the People) in its zenith allegedly had a membership of 200,000 people, mostly made up of Wat Phra Dhammakāya members (Taylor, 2001:141).

Four outside (*etic*) perspectives on Wat Phra Dhammakāya

Wat Phra Dhammakāya – a 'fundamentalist' movement?

The term *fundamentalist* carries the connotation of being aggressive and reactionary. The word was first used as a self-designation term by a group of Baptists in the

northern United States in 1920 to describe their own view of the Christian Scriptures, as well as their reaction against higher criticism and liberal theology within their own denomination. In the 1970s, the term was first applied to the Ayatollah Komeini, and then to other Islamic groups, eventually being applied to other movements. It may initially seem inappropriate to apply the term to certain religious traditions which have a reputation for being inclusive, such as Buddhism.

The American based 'Fundamentalism Project' was a comprehensive study of the term fundamentalism and was conducted between 1988 and 1993. It 'involved over a hundred scholars from a variety of academic disciplines and religious traditions' (Harris, 2001:10). The project resulted in the publication between 1991 and 1995 of a five volume series. At the end of the project, nine characteristics of 'fundamentalisms' were identified and are summed up by Harris.[34] Points of contact between Harris' summary and Wat Phra Dhammakāya are made under each heading.

Reactivity to the marginalisation of religion (especially to secularisation, both in opposing and exploiting it.) Those who seek ordination, or wish to become *ubasok* and *ubasika* at Wat Phra Dhammakāya, are expected to have completed undergraduate studies. Members of the movement tend to be well educated and appreciate monastics and staff workers having a similar social and academic background to themselves. One of the problems facing the *Saṅgha* is its loss of status in society. Monks, up until comparatively recently, functioned as teachers in temple-based schools. With the development of government schools, this role is no longer required from the *Saṅgha*. It is a challenge for an increasing number of well-educated, upwardly mobile Thai to respect monastics who have not had university education. Another way in which the *Saṅgha* has been judged irrelevant is through the number of financial and moral scandals which have been reported by the media concerning monastics. Wat Phra Dhammakāya has a strong but practical emphasis on morality through the practice of meditation and listening to teaching. The temple's approach is not to reject financial gain or the enjoyment of possessions but rather to keep the Precepts while enjoying a prosperous lifestyle.

Selectivity (both in selecting and shaping particular aspects of their religious tradition, and in selecting some aspects of modernity to affirm and others to oppose) *Dhammakāya* meditation is selected as crucial for the progress of individuals as well as the movement's expansion. Its practice leads to moral purity, equipping one to fulfil ones' full potential, and the neutralising/destruction of evil forces.

Moral dualism (dividing the world into light and darkness, good and evil). As already stated, the myth of the Black and White *Dhammakāya* is strongly dualistic. It provides a theoretical base for the financing of a centre for *Dhammakāya* meditation which will be global in its scope.

Absolutism and inerrancy (affirming the absolute validity of the perceived fundamentals of the tradition and, in the case of the Abrahamic religions and

Sikhism, treating sacred texts as inerrant). Wat Phra Dhammakāya takes the study of texts seriously (albeit selected texts).[35] In response to a question regarding Santi Asoke's model of meditation, Phra Dattacheewo asked me to read the *Gaṇakamoggallāna Sutta* and then explained some aspects of the *sutta* to me. Phra Dattacheewo believed Santi Asoke's approach to be ill informed because it does not sufficiently engage with the texts. There is within the Wat Phra Dhammakāya an absolutism about *Dhammakāya* mediation being *the* model of meditation practised by the Buddha. He is seen to have used it aged seven while waiting for his father to leave the ploughing ceremony at which he was officiating. Gotama stopped using that method of meditation as other models were taught to him by wandering ascetics. He returned to it, however, and as a result was able to achieve enlightenment. *Dhammakāya* meditation ceased to be part of Buddhist practice within the first 500 years of the movement, as supposedly predicted by the Buddha. The genius of Luang Phaw Sot is his 'rediscovery' of the true *Dhamma* (*sudhamma*) of Buddhism, that is, the meditative practice of the Buddha. This is the key belief and distinguishing characteristic of the movement, and its members are extremely keen to involve outsiders in the practice of *Dhammakāya* meditation.

Millennialism and messianism (promising victory to the believer in the culmination of history). The movement is a millenarian movement, and Phra Dhammachayo is understood by members to be a saviour figure. This is explained, propagated and sustained by myth, rumour and mystery.

Elect membership (viewed often as the faithful remnant). Membership of the movement will mean hard work for those who are committed. Yet there is the idea that a person's good *karma* has resulted in the enormous privilege of having the opportunity to develop in *Dhammakāya* meditation.

Sharp boundaries (separating the saved from the sinful). Negative media attention, public condemnation and monastic proceedings have caused the movement to 'draw in'. Yet according to Phra Nicholas this has served to draw the membership closer together.[36] The more one practises *Dhammakāya* meditation, the more one is liberated from delusion. A moral purification takes place as one's original righteousness is reclaimed. The colour of the interior area surrounding the location of the crystal sphere is some indication of a person's character. Black indicates evil, white represents purity and grey is a position in between these extremes. Ultimately, those on the side of the White *Dhammakāya* are safe, while those who do not practise *Dhammakāya* meditation (and are thus deluded) are lost.

Authoritarian organisation (with a charismatic leadership and little possibility of opposition from within). Although monastic proceedings and public criticisms of the abbot eventually caused Phra Dattacheewo to move from being vice-abbot to acting abbot, Phra Dhammachayo remains the leader. Indeed he is still referred to by many as the abbot! Phra Dhammachayo has enormous authority which is legitimised by myth, further confirmed by rumours of his physic powers, and enhanced by his remote lifestyle at the temple. There is a core of inner-circle monks committed to ensuring Phra Dhammachayo's wishes are carried out.

Behavioural requirements (treating the member's time, space and activity as a group resource). Cell groups are used to integrate members into the movement, and each group has a particular activity focus, including the raising of funds. Use is made of members' resources and networks for the common good of the movement.

Donald Swearer (1991:678) cites what he considers to be the distinctive features of fundamentalism in the Theravādin context. These include

- Being lead by strong, (often militantly aggressive) charismatic leaders;
- Followers who perceive themselves to be under some kind of threat;
- The movement will have an obsessive sense of their unique role or destiny and have anti-rationalist, anti-intellectual and even anti-ritualistic tendencies;
- They will also tend to stress the value of direct experience coupled with plain and simple religious practice;
- Idealogies embraced tend to rest upon simplistic, dualistic and absolutistic world views.

To demonstrate connections between Swearer's criteria and Wat Phra Dhammakāya would be too repetitive. It would appear from the criteria from Swearer and Marty and Applby that Wat Phra Dhammakāya may be classified as *fundamentalist*. Yet the size, progressive nature and global vision of the movement do not resonate with the term *fundamentalist*, and in that sense the term is misleading. On the other hand, the complete commitment to practising (and encouraging others to practise) *Dhammakāya* meditation, as well as the insistence that it was *the* meditation model that the Buddha used, indicate a fundamentalist mood.

Wat Phra Dhammakāya – a millenarian movement?

Millenarianism, as a religious phenomenon, is the belief that the end of the world is at hand, and a new, just order will replace it. 'The more exclusive the concern with the end itself, the more such belief shades off toward the catastrophic, the more exclusive the concern with the New World, the nearer it approaches the utopian' (Skek, 1987:521). The present order, (which the movement devalues and reacts against) will be destroyed. There is also a sharp distinction between insiders who will be saved (or live in peace), and those who are committed to maintaining the status quo, who will eventually be destroyed.

A millenarian movement in Thai is referred to as a *phu mi bun* movement. *Phu mi bun* means 'person with merit', and followers of such a person view their leader as a holy person. This person may be identified by a demonstration of miraculous acts which benefits a few individuals. In this case such a person is referred to as a *phu wiset* meaning 'a person with extraordinary powers'. Keyes (1977:289) points out that such a person will gain a reputation of being able to

help many who come to him seeking help. This person (often a monk) will be known as a *phu mi bun*.[37] If such leadership is on hand during a time of perceived crisis, then the *phu mi bun* will be looked to for deliverance.

Thailand has had several *phu mi bun* movements. Perhaps the best known one occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century, and is referred to in English as 'The Holy Men's Rebellion'. This uprising's roots can be traced back to 1867 'when the Siamese court was forced by France to relinquish its tributary authority over the Kingdom of Cambodia' (Keyes, 1977:293). Fifteen years later, senior government officials were sent to the north-east region of Siam to strengthen King Chulalongkorn's control in the region. They began to take on the duties (and privileges) previously held by local ruling families. High taxes, losses of freedom, (an example of this was the outlawing of tattooing by Prince Sanphasit, who was in charge of the area), displaced people, poor harvests in the region over two consecutive years, all contributed to people feeling anxious, marginalised and in great social need.

By 1899, Siamese officials began to receive reports that *phu wiset* had emerged who were doing miracles (probably healings) and issuing people with sacred water. Singers had begun to go around the region singing about the coming of a *phu mi bun*. The prediction not only spread by song but also through hand-written manuscripts. According to Keyes (1977:295), there were at least four different written versions of the message. Each version commenced with the prediction of imminent disaster. During the disaster many ordinary things would be transformed. Wyatt writes,

> Gravel will become gold and silver and gold and silver will become gravel. Gourds and pumpkins will become elephants and horses, albino buffalo and pigs will become man – eating *yaksa* [giants]. Thao Thammikarat (a Lord of the Holy Law) will come to rule the world.
>
> (Wyatt, 1984:214)

The manuscripts go on to say that those who follow the *phu mi bun* will not only be delivered from harm, but prosper.

> Whoever wishes to remain free from these evil happenings should copy or retell this story and make it generally known. If one is pure and has not performed any evil or bad karmic deeds (or if one wishes to become rich), one should collect pebbles so that Thao Thammikarat can transform them into gold or silver.
>
> (Keyes, 1977:296)

A clear millenarian pattern emerges. There is a prediction of the immanent destruction of the status quo, a reversal of natural conditions, and there is both deliverance and hope for a new future for those who demonstrate their trust in the *phu mi bun*.[38] In February 1902, Phra Yanarakkhit the senior monk in the north-east region reported that in the *Saṅgha* (Surin province) everyone was

talking about the *phu mi bun*. In some places the rice was not harvested and the cattle were allowed to eat it (Keyes, 1997:297).

Early in 1902, three key leaders of the *phu mi bun* movement in north-east Thailand were identified. Man, from French Laos, claimed to be Cao (or Ong) Prasatthong.[39] A local government official wrote,

> [H]e claims to be a *phu wiset* and has gone about demonstrating his powers by keeping the (Eight) Precepts, meditating in caves and in the hills, and making sacralized water. He deceives the populace that he is a *phu wiset* who can cure various illnesses with magic (*rut*), sacralized water and enchanted medicine (*khunya*).
>
> (Keyes, 1977:297)

Thao Bucan was a leader of another faction of the *phu mi bun* movement which operated in the region now known as Sri Sisaket, in North-East Thailand. He was disappointed not to be made governor of his region, and left town along with two other noblemen. They established themselves as *phu mi bun* in a nearby village, attracting a following of around 6,000.

Lek was the third figure in this broad based *phu mi bun* movement. He had a (probably small) following in what is now referred to as the province of Mahāsarakham. It is less than clear the extent to which these leaders related to each other, and whether or not they shared the same goals. According to Keyes (1977:298), one minor leader interviewed after the uprising was quashed indicated that they shared the common objective 'to establish a kingdom which was not under the Siamese or the French'. Once the opposing powers in the region were neutralised, power was to be shared by four of the main leaders, each leader located in a different principal town in the north-east region.

Siamese military patrols were dispatched to arrest the movement's ring leaders. Thao Buncan was killed and his followers were dispersed. The other military patrols were not so successful. Man and Lek joined forces and led a party of 2,500 followers on one of the large towns in the area. They killed two of the chief nobles of the city, captured the governor of the province and looted the town. More followers joined the millenarian movement. This, however, galvanised the Siamese government to send in more troops. After a 4 hour battle the rebels were comprehensively defeated. While there was no loss of life among the government solders, 200 rebels were killed, 500 injured and around 400 eventually captured. The senior leaders were executed in their home villages as an example of what happens to rebels. The minor leaders were imprisoned, while the followers had to participate in ceremonies in which they drank the water of allegiance and pledged loyalty to King Chulalongkorn (Keyes, 1977:299).

A government review of the uprising caused it to conclude that poverty was a contributing factor. Projects to help the people of the region were established, including a railway system to open up the region. The government wisely slowed

down the pace of change in the region, and recruited local land owners into the civil service. The *Saṅgha Act of 1902* was passed by the government which began a process of standardisation of Buddhist teaching and practice. Buddhism and education, (which at that time was carried out in temple schools) were used as tools for unifying the kingdom. 'The message conveyed to villages throughout Siam was "only the person who has merit" has the power to share the benefits of this merit with others and that is the King of Siam' (Keyes, 1977:300).

It would be wrong, however, to think that millenarian movements were restricted to the rural poor. The Hupphasawan movement which reached its zenith in terms of popularity in the late 1970s 'drew a considerable degree of its support from among some of the most privileged and powerful sections of Thai society' (Jackson, 1988:134). This movement was founded by a Sino-Thai spirit medium, Suchart Kosonkittiwong. Suchart, born in 1943 and brought up in a poor family in Bangkok, had a basic education and spent some time in the army as a conscript. On leaving the army, Suchart became a healer and sold magical cures from his house in Thonburi, just across the Chao Phraya river from Bangkok. He claimed that he had been selected by the spirit world to act as a medium for three deceased monks who are highly regarded in Thailand.[40] 'Suchart saw himself as a material focus of a supernatural power whose mission was to save Thailand, and the world, from the moral degeneration and suffering which communism had given rise to' (Jackson, 1988b:140). Just as the marginalised in North-East Thailand had aligned themselves with a *phu mi bun* and looked forward to deliverance from danger and better things to come, so those in the urban context who felt their positions (economically and/or politically) were under threat from communism sought help from Suchart.

The perceived threat of communism was very real in Thailand, and the focus of the nation was resisting it. Cambodia, (bordering on Thailand), broke off diplomatic relations with Thailand in 1959. North Vietnam and the People's Republic of China began to support anti-government insurgency in Thailand (Wyatt, 1984:287) and by 1962, the Voice of the People of Thailand was broadcasting from South China. The Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) were particularly strong in North-East Thailand and in the late 1960s they linked up with a number of Islamic Socialist groups in the southern part of the country and also 'among the Meo/Hmong and Yao groups in the north, and among the Karen settlements in the west along the Burmese Border' (Phongpaichit and Baker, 1995:295). The American government worked very closely with their Thai counterparts giving them every assistance in combating the communist insurrection.[41]. Despite these efforts, in 1979 the CPT 'had an estimated 10,000 armed members' (Phongpaichit and Baker, 1995: 311).

Aware of the mounting tension communism was bringing, Suchart commenced the building of a religious centre in 1970. It was named 'The Religious State of the Vale of Heaven' (Thai *Anajak Hupphasawan Muang*). Located in Ratburi Province, approximately two hours drive south-west of Bangkok, it functioned as an international federation of religions and organised pan-religious opposition to

the spread of communism. The inter-religious aspect of the movement was represented by statues of the Buddha, Jesus, Mary, Shiva and Kuan Im (Chinese, Guan Yin).[42] The centre attracted the Supreme Patriarch and senior Roman Catholic clergy on the occasion of an exhibition on Christianity, Buddhism and peace. The movement had its critics. Anun Senakhan, 'gate-keeper' of traditional Thai beliefs and practices, referred to Suchart as a *phī bun* (Jackson, 1988:138). This play on similarly sounding words but different tone means Suchart is accused of being a ghost (Thai *phi*) rather than a 'person of merit'. As the movement gained protection from influential people, Suchart became more extreme in his predictions.

> He predicted that Thailand would become the focus of the world's ideological rivalry, would be invaded simultaneously by the Vietnamese, the Chinese, and the US, and would be the flash-point for a nuclear war. The catastrophe would occur in 1982 unless people supported his movement of spiritual opposition. Suchart announced that only he and the King could engineer the salvation of Thailand. The government were no more than a 'flock of sparrows', while he and the King were equivalent '*phu mi bun*' (men of merit) who had the sole responsibility to lead the spiritual crusade against communism. He advised the King to abdicate and join him in his crusade.
>
> (Phongpaichit and Baker, 1995:318)

At the end of 1981, police raided the Ratburi centre. Suchart escaped but was caught some six years later. He was given a one year prison sentence and later released on bail. Just as the millenarian movement in the north-east region in 1902 was brought to an end by the establishment, so the Hupphasawan movement was declared to be unacceptable by the establishment. It may well be that religious and political leaders were prepared to support, or even ignore some aspects of the Hupphasawan movement in its earlier days because of its anti-communist position. The call, however, for the king to abdicate and co-lead the nation with the Hupphasawan founder was an extremely sensitive issue. To make public such vision suggests either madness, or a very strong power base with support in the upper echelons of society/government. Jackson (1988:164) quotes Buddhist critic Krajang Nanthapho:

> The activities of Huppasawan received increasing coverage until those with secular and religious power in the country began suspecting that the movement was no longer an instrument of their own policies as they had previously thought. This was especially the case when Suchart became a famous person eclipsing even the leading figures in the government.… The movement was destroyed because it grew large beyond all bounds, to the point that people at the level of government could not control it.

The appeal of Hupphasawan was to middle to upper class Thai who were to some extent not wielding as much political power as they would have wished.[43] These people believed they would lose wealth and/or status, should communism become a strong force within the nation. The movement provided a supernatural hope and legitimisation of opposition to communism in the name of well-accepted Buddhist folk religion *outwith* the *Saṅgha*, the official expression of Buddhism.

Wat Phra Dhammakāya, in a similar way to Hupphasawan, offers a myth of a supernatural force located out with the Thai *Saṅgha* which offers protection to wealth and prestige. Wat Phra Dhammakāya remains within the *Saṅgha*, yet within the movement there is a particular understanding of their function as White *Dhammakāya* overcoming Māra as well as Phra Dhammachayo's role as being an *Avatāra* and part of the original White *Dhammakāya*. This suggests that Wat Phra Dhammakāya is a millenarian movement, and Phra Dhammachayo fulfils the role of a *phu mi bun* to the membership. Feungfusakul points out that the bio-graphy of Phra Dhammachayo uses a traditional genre such as is used to describe traditional heroes and Buddhist saints to portray the movement's leader as a sanctified leader.[44] For example, during her pregnancy, Phra Dhammachayo's mother is said to 'have had a dream that she was given a Buddha image which, after being rubbed, shone so brightly it lit up the town' (*Bangkok Post,* 21.12.98).

It would appear that there are stories circulating around Wat Phra Dhammakāya that Phra Dhammachayo is a 'holy crusader' with mind reading powers. Members also talk of light radiating from his body (*Bangkok Post,* 21.12.98). One temple trainee described the leader as follows:

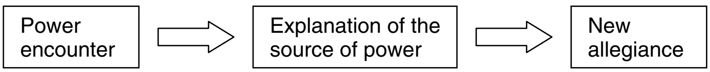
> His carriage was magnificent, his complexion clear, clean, and radiantly glowing beneath the yellow robe. The attractiveness of his appearance . . . caused me to be filled with such joy that tears flowed without my realising it. That picture will surely remain firmly in my heart and mind as long as I live.
>
> (Swearer, 1991:665)

The leader of Wat Phra Dhammakāya is thus viewed by the movement's membership as a person with great merit. The myth that explains the genesis of White *Dhammakāya* and the mission of Wat Phra Dhammakāya as well as the role of Phra Dhammachayo, all serve to perpetuate an understanding that the leader is a *phu mi bun*. The mysterious, indeed sacred image is further enhanced through Phra Dhammachayo's remoteness. He does not eat with monks in the main hall and unlike Phra Dattacheewo, he very seldom appears in public.

> The exact time his followers can meet him is on a Sunday afternoon in a pavilion in the inner part of the temple. He is said to be a very good meditation teacher, but only the selected ones have the chance

> to learn directly from him, usually the close followers, high ranking lay personnel or certain lay contributors who, according to the abbot's judgement, possess certain inherent mental faculty.
>
> (Feungfusakul, 1993:76)

In the two examples of millenarianism which we have examined, we have noted a perception by followers that leaders have access to miraculous powers.[45] Indeed, this perception legitimises the leaders in the eyes of the followers. The demonstration of miraculous/magic power demonstrates the ability of a leader to deliver what potential followers require. As the need is met, an allegiance is formed between the leader and followers. This may be diagrammed as follows:



Source: Adapted from a diagram by Charles Kraft (1991:258–65).

The power encounter is a significant sign, or signs, where the *phu wiset/phu mi bun* demonstrates the possession of a power that is greater than opposing threats, or delivers something that potential followers are seeking. An example of the former is a magical charm that protected followers from bullets from the protesting Chinese tin miners in South Thailand. The biography of Phra Dhammachayo tells of the monk, then a student at Kasetsart University, having a ‘duel of supernatural powers with Padet Pongsawat, an older Kasetsart University student. After losing, Mr Padet turned into Phra Dhammachayo's foremost supporter, and is now Phra Dattacheewo' (*Bangkok Post,* 21.12.98). This is possible, as we read Phra Dattacheewo ‘turned his back on his former expertise in black magic to pursue a life of virtue' (www.dhammakāya.be Lesson No.5, Section 9). A member of the movement informed me that all he knew about a power encounter was that the then Mr Padet was with Phra Dhammachayo when the latter triumphed over ‘the so-called supernatural powers of others.'[46]

The explanation of the source of power may well be made by followers who attribute it to the merit amassed by the *phu wiset/phu mi bun*, or his contacts with the supernatural world, as observed in the Hupphasawan movement. In the initial stages it will be the aspiring leader who will explain why he has such power, and how it is relevant to potential followers. A new allegiance is the result of a convinced enquirer making a commitment to the one who has power and becoming part of the movement.

Richard Shek (1987:526) notes that millenarian movements go through phases: ‘an expansive phase during which believers move out to a ripening world and an astringent phase during which they pull in toward a holy refuge'. This statement resonates with Wat Phra Dhammakāya's short history. In the early years of the movement, their fund raising and recruitment was high profile as white-clothed members went door-to-door on housing estates. Media criticism and eventual legal and monastic investigations curtailed the movement's activities, causing

them to 'pull in to a holy refuge'. This experience, as well as the movement's loss of initial vitality has brought about lower profile methods of operating.

Millenarians tend to believe that a new day will soon dawn for them; millenarianism 'is distinguished from other eschatological belief systems in that the millennium is believed to be imminent' (Keyes, 1977:283). This was clearly the case with the North–East Thailand and Hupphasawan movements. Wat Phra Dhammakāya is a curious mix of millenarian and prosperity movements. The element of the immediate is inherent in experiencing the benefits of meditation and alms-giving. Yet the movement is also concerned with long-term mission, which is the releasing of mankind from the delusion that prevents them from seeing the truth. Wat Phra Dhammakāya is being prepared to be the centre for these operations.

In response to the question 'May Wat Phra Dhammakāya be considered a millenarian movement?' Phra Nicholas responded 'It is Wat Phra Dhammakāya's practice to emphasize the tradition, not the leader. In more recent times with the intense pressure placed on the movement by the media, Phra Dhammachayo has become very high profile.'[47] Phra Nicholas went on to point out that the movement pays great honour to the *Dhammakāya* model of meditation and the masters of the tradition. He cited Luang Phaw Sot who *rediscovered Dhammakāya* meditation and Khun Yai Chan who trained Phra Dhammachayo and Phra Dattacheewo, the two leaders of the movement.[48] Currently, Phra Dhammachayo is understood to be the leader of the movement.

Lineage then is seen as a particularly important concept within Wat Phra Dhammakāya. In other traditions, when a high-profile leader passed away, the movement went into decline, as it focused on a person rather than a tradition and/or lineage. Phra Nicholas cited the example of the temple at Suan Mokh (South Thailand) which was built up through the scholarship and teaching of Buddhadāsa (1906–93) and went into decline when Buddhadāsa passed away. This in his opinion was the result of the Thai practice of following a strong leader who is perceived to have merit. Phra Dhammachayo expresses his confidence in the ability of the movement to continue after his death, 'If I die, the system here has already been put in place. If I pass away, the temple can carry on with its mission. Nobody worries about that' (Gearing, 1999). It is true that lineage is important to Wat Phra Dhammakāya, and that the movement will continue when Phra Dhammachayo dies. This, however, does not weaken the argument for Wat Phra Dhammakāya being classified as a millenarian movement.

Economic instability brings anxieties, just as the activities of the Communist Party of Thailand did, for example diminished earning power and ability to control situations. Wat Phra Dhammakāya members believe that their giving to the temple and practice of *Dhammakāya* meditation will help ensure their prosperity and status. Just as there was the possibility of a physical conflict with communist armed troops, so Wat Phra Dhammakāya members currently see a spiritual power encounter ahead. It would be interesting to know if part of the purpose of the myth was to recreate a sense of physical uncertainty after communist dominance ceased to be a threat in the region. In terms of surviving the spiritual conflict between

the White and Black *Dhammakāya* and being on the winning side, there is a clear dependence on Phra Dhammachayo, a *phu mi bun*, or greater still *Avatāra*. 'Though not clearly spelt out in public, many Wat Phra Dhammakāya followers believe that world calamity is approaching and their leader is to be the new messiah when the world "has cooled down"' (Bangkok Post, 21.12.98). There is a faith in and commitment to Phra Dhammachayo, indeed there is a rumour of a ritual of members making a vow to be willing to die for him (*Bangkok Post,* 22.3.00).

Wat Phra Dhammakāya – a galactic structure?

Stanley Tambiah describes what he has termed the 'galactic polity'. Galactic polity models understandings of cosmological structures. Precise patterns of organisational groupings around the centre vary. For example, they may be in radial patterns or concentric circles. A particular *maṇḍala* may be used which is modelled on a certain number of units, for example, 9, 17 or 33, or indeed, larger units. Such schemes 'mirrored a cosmos that was deployed first and foremost topographically. And since this topography represented a cosmic harmony, there was a good reason to pattern the state after it' (Tambiah, 1976:110).

The concept of the galactic polity is that of a central space from where control is exercised over a surrounding area. This 'centre represents the totality and embodies the unity of the whole' (Tambiah, 1976:114). Rigid area boundaries do not exist in the galactic paradigm; instead boundaries expand/contract depending on the increase/decrease of power at the centre. Located in the centre of the galactic system was the king's capital. It was surrounded by provinces controlled by princes or governors appointed by the king. These, in turn, were surrounded by more or less independent 'tributary' polities (Tambiah, 1976: 112).

Donald Swearer believes that the informing ideas of the galactic polity have virtually disappeared due to the dissolution of the absolute monarchy in 1932 and the development of the modern nation state. Swearer takes the view that Wat Phra Dhammakāya is re-creating the old galactic policy and in so doing offers a visible structure that is reminiscent of the past to a society who views the *Saṅgha* as important.

> By fashioning a distinctive movement within the Mahānikāya tradition, organised around a national centre, [Wat Phra] Dhammakāya proposes in effect to recreate the old galactic polity model and thereby to restore a vivid and dynamic past to a fragmented Thai society and a political environment continually beset by corruption and factionalism, in which the symbolic power of the monarchy is waning and the practical power of religion is virtually non existent.
>
> (Swearer, 1991:657)

Schober disagrees with Swearer's theory and writes, 'The new Buddhist movements redefine the role of religious community within society. This trend

has promoted further laicization in religious matters and erosion of centralised monastic authority' (Schober, 1995:308). Also, these new movements 'position themselves largely antithetically to the social–religious paradigms of the galactical polity of the modern nation-state' (Schober, 1995:319).

The *Saṅgha* has been used to legitimise kingship and government within the nation. It has also been utilised to strengthen the nation's security. For example, the Phra Thammacharik order worked among the tribes of North Thailand trying to convert them from the practice of Primal Religion (Animism) to Buddhism. This was to assimilate them into Thai society and minimise communist growth in the region. Swearer attributes the re-creation of the galactic polity to Wat Phra Dhammakāya without reference to other components of galactic polity, for example, hegemony, economic control and political function. A discussion of Wat Phra Dhammakāya in reference to its relationships with these components would strengthen Swearer's claim. It may, however, be argued that Swearer is simply using the concept of Wat Phra Dhammakāya operating out of a strong centre, to influence that which is grouped around it.

There has been an ebb and flow of Wat Phra Dhammakāya's influence within the Thai *Saṅgha* since Swearer and Schober wrote in the early to mid 1990s. Since the beginning of the economic recession in 1997, the media have been highly critical of Wat Phra Dhammakāya, and the movement lost much of its credibility; indeed it has struggled to remain within the Thai *Saṅgha*. Since the stepping down of Phra Dhammachayo as abbot, Wat Phra Dhammakāya has received much less criticism in the media. Indeed, the movement is increasingly involved in supporting the administrative work of the *Mahā thera samakom* in its leadership of the Thai *Saṅgha*.

Swearer's connection between Wat Phra Dhammakāya and galactic polity may be sustained if the movement were to be viewed as operating on an international rather than a national basis. Wat Phra Dhammakāya members view its temple as the centre of the world. From this centre, the delusion-overcoming message of *Dhammakāya* meditation will radiate out to the rest of the world. This global perspective is much grander than Swearer's national view, which is based on a reconstruction of Ayutthaya (and later Bangkok) as being the centre of the power which controlled Siam. Wat Phra Dhammakāya's vision is much greater than rejuvenating the Thai *Saṅgha*. Their understanding of a galactic structure is a strong centre in Bangkok but radiating to the ends of the earth with a message not currently accepted by the Thai *Saṅgha*.

Wat Phra Dhammakāya centres throughout the world may be viewed as satellites – 'more or less "autonomous" entities held in orbit and within the sphere of influence of the centre' (Tambiah, 1976:113). A contemporary use of the galactic model does not rely on the replication of a ceremony that has first been conducted at the centre. In times past seasonal rites were orchestrated so that a rite was first performed at the capital by the king or his delegate. It was then repeated by the provincial rulers, and then by their lesser district heads (Tambiah, 1976:111). The use of Satellite TV and web-based technology now mean that

throughout the world Wat Phra Dhammakāya members may simultaneously participate in an act of meditation being led by Phra Dhammachayo, or other senior monks at the temple in Bangkok.[49] Members of the movement go to extraordinary lengths to be with other members at a Wat Phra Dhammakāya centre for Sunday sermons, especially on the first Sunday of each month when the offering is presented through meditation to the Buddhas in *āyatananibbāna*.[50] The act of being together with other members and joining in meditation which is being led by the movement's leader in Bangkok, creates a feeling of identity. This, coupled with the travel (often a journey of several hours) to the movement's centre, functions as an act of allegiance to the leader and the movement. Teaching disseminated like this will be received uncritically and will serve to ensure that 'the lesser unit is a reproduction and imitation of the larger' (Tambiah, 1976:112).

A high-profile centre is certainly created through the presence of 700 *ubasoks* and *ubasikas*, 600 monks and 3–400 novices. Indeed, the number of monks and novices considerably increase during *phansa*. In addition, the movement offers lay people the opportunity to purchase small houses on temple land to use for relaxation and meditation. The temple is a central base for hosting training and conferences as well as gatherings of senior monks. Indeed, there is no need to leave the centre to engage in the conservative forest dwelling ascetic practices. These are held on temple grounds and Wat Phra Dhammakāya 'thus short-circuits the seeking out of spiritual power from forest monks by relocating that power within the lay followers themselves' (Jackson, 1989:207). The temple has also become a place of pilgrimage for *Dhammakāya* meditators from around the world. Western lay people often come for special training in meditation, and non-Wat Phra Dhammakāya monks from other Asian countries, as well as from within the kingdom are sponsored to attend meditation courses at the temple.

Wat Phra Dhammakāya – a Buddhist commodity/prosperity movement?

Outsiders may describe Wat Phra Dhammakāya's style of Buddhism as 'commodity Buddhism'. A Buddha image is offered for sale and purchasing it is said to secure a variety of benefits for the donor. The item, transaction and results are clearly explained, identifiable and measurable, rather than abstract. Suwanna Satha-Anand, associate professor of Buddhist philosophy at Chulalongkorn University, is quoted as saying: Wat Phra Dhammakāya concretises Buddhist ideals to respond to the consumer culture which dominates Thai society. It gives people a 'you can see what you pay for kind of feeling' (Daorueng, 1999:39).

Fuengfusakul agrees and writes that the Thai word *bun* (merit) is 'thus treated as though it were a concrete object. Expressions such as "a heap of bun" or "greedy for bun" are frequently used [by members]' (1993b:167). Temple members would dispute this perspective, pointing out that the image or amulet is simply a memento from the temple to remind the donor of that act of merit-making.

The Dhammakāya Foundation system is 'user-friendly' for the busy person. There is a clear advantage in meeting on a Sunday as opposed to a Buddhist holy

day which is often on a day during the working week. There are activities for children and young people and a commitment to working with the young at Wat Phra Dhammakāya. This is very attractive for parents raising their children in a rapidly changing and increasingly Westernised Thai urban culture.[51] The temple permits members a prosperous life style, yet provides a sense of the spiritual through participation in meditation, chanting and listening to the teaching of the *Dhamma*. One business man shared how, since meditating and applying the temple's teaching to his life, he is able to resist the normal temptations faced by businessmen in Thailand.[52] The movement's lifestyle promotes good family values and seeks to provide a network of like minded friends to facilitate spiritual development.

In '1988 the movement won an award from the Business Management Association of Thailand for its religious market planning strategies' (Jackson, 1997:83). This honour is not recorded in the list of organisational awards in the movement's 'Introduction to the Work of the Dhammakāya Foundation', their well-produced piece of English language publicity. It was in the same year that Kukrit Pramoj, the kingdom's prime minister from 1975 to 1976 and astute socio-political commentator questioned 'whether the temple is offering spirituality or "religious pleasure" comparable to that of recreation clubs and fishing parks' (Keyes, 1991:395). Wat Phra Dhammakāya respond by saying that they are empowering lay people to engage with, rather than renounce the world they live in, through moral and meditation training. This synthesis of spirituality, economic success and consumerism, however, does not sit well with many Thai traditionalists.

Wat Phra Dhammakāya may be described as a Buddhist prosperity movement as the acquiring of wealth is emphasised as well as securing a good rebirth. The movement promises peace and prosperity as donors contribute to temple causes. There will be altruistic donors whose main purpose in giving, for example, to the Dhammakāya Cetiya, is to contribute to the construction of a monument that gives appropriate honour to the teachings of the Buddha, as well as reminding members of the movement's stated aim of bringing about world peace through inner peace (the *Dhammakāya* within).[53] Less altruistic donors may have the personal fruit of the merit-making action primarily in mind as they purchase an image to be placed in the *cetiya*.

The crucial issues here are: to what extent is psychological pressure exerted on people in order to secure donations, and is Buddhist teaching in any way distorted as a result of the advertising process? In 1999, certain sections of the media complained to the police about the way in which the public were being pressurised into purchasing Buddha images by Wat Phra Dhammakāya. Had they been able to collect at least ten people willing to formalise a complaint, they could have called for an official investigation. Despite over 400,000 images having been sold at that point, the media were unable to bring an official complaint to the police department (Thanavuddho, 2000:11).

Potential pressure applies not just to donors but also to those members who are trying to sell images within their own networks, and who may be operating under

real or imagined burdens from their leaders to secure sales. Phra Santikaro alleges 'Wat Phra Dhammakāya recruited school principals, hospital directors, and other such civil servants, then had them pressure their staff to attend Wat Phra Dhammakāya activities and make donations' (*Bangkok Post,* 22.3.02).[54] Feungfusakul mentions 62 subgroups who are encouraged to use a direct face-to-face approach to mobilise funds from their network of family, friends and work colleagues, as well as door-to-door visitation. She goes on to comment,

> For the members, merit making means not only that the person himself does the act, but also that he should persuade as much people as possible to join this stream of merit. . . .Techniques to encourage fund-raising are continuously discussed in the sub-group leader meetings. Rewards in the various forms are offered to members who can raise a given amount within a determined period, e.g. golden shields, lockets decorated with precious stones and a picture of Khun Yai Chan, and various sizes of crystal Buddha images.
>
> (Feungfusakul, 1993:125)

One Thai academic [55] informed me that Wat Phra Dhammakāya uses a pyramid operational structure where sales/recruitment teams and their hierarchical management are rewarded for the number of sales made, or recruits brought in to temple membership.[56] The booking form for a *Dhammakāya* image for the *cetiya* requires the name of the team, group, staff name and staff number to be completed, yet this does not prove sales people are rewarded in any way for securing donors. Wat Phra Dhammakāya point out that every temple expects to receive from those who attend and use its services. Their expenses are significant as they provide services for those who do not donate, for example, bringing monks from all over Thailand and outside the kingdom to Wat Phra Dhammakāya for instruction in meditation. Phra Nicholas indicated that the Dhammakāya Foundation had no hesitancy in asking its membership to give.[57] Indeed, the more a member gives the more that member will benefit. This is in line with the general Buddhist idea that *dāna* 'leads simply and naturally to the more advanced stages. Above all, it reduces possessiveness and selfishness, leading naturally to the sensitivity of others' (Cousins, 1997:395). Not only does the giver (*dāyaka*) progress on the spiritual path, there is also the *karmic* fruit of the giving to be experienced at some future point. If the act of giving is conducted with pure motives, and the giving is to a noble cause (such as Wat Phra Dhammakāya) then the act of giving is truly meritorious. Nevertheless, traditional Buddhism does not say that if you give 'x', you will automatically receive 'y'.

Unlike Santi Asoke, Wat Phra Dhammakāya is comfortable with the capitalist approach to economics (Thai *thun-niyom*). A good economy is understood as benefiting the nation. Clearly as members are enabled to work harder and be morally restrained through the practice of *Dhammakāya* meditation, then they will become more prosperous. Yet the act of giving is not only meritorious, it curbs striving after wealth and hoarding possessions. Phra Dattacheewo

challenged me to answer what would happen to Thailand if Santi Asoke's economic model of *bun-niyom* was adopted.[58] *Bun-niyom* is a Buddhist approach to economics based on meritism, where the profit margin is deliberately marginal. According to Bodhirak, the leader of the Santi Asoke movement, this approach encourages people to help others, and results in 'the birth of a "Buddha mind" which enables people to live according to the teachings of the Buddha' (Heikkilä-Horn, 1997:122).[59] Clearly the expected answer to Phra Dattacheewo's answer was the country would quickly go into economic decline!

No critique of capitalistic development has come from the *Saṅgha* [leadership] since 1957 (Keyes, 1990:389), as this would be detrimental to economic development (and the government regulates to a large extent the *Saṅgha's* public statements).[60] Economic prosperity results in more donations to the *Saṅgha* from government, companies, charities and individuals. There have, however, been concerns expressed by monks about an excessively materialistic approach that ignores Buddhist principles. Buddhadāsa is an example of a monastic who critically engaged with a development approach that ignored Buddhist principles. 'We still run after the tail end of the progress of those who are materially developed. Why do we worship the material side of development? . . . because we don't know that it is dangerous to humanity' (Jackson, 1988:236).

There are some similarities between Wat Phra Dhammakāya and the Christian prosperity gospel. A basic tenet of the latter is that poverty and sickness are a consequence of 'the fall', which is the work of evil. 'The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work' (1 John 3:8), thus those who have faith in Christ and what he may provide for them may claim prosperity and good health.[61] An essential feature of such movements is teaching on the relationship between giving to the movement (the same as giving to God) and being blessed by God. It is set forward in terms of cause and effect, and the donor is promised that he/she will invariably be better off as a result of giving. Important and (legitimate) principles in fund raising are to demonstrate to the donor how the project is in line with his/her value system and of the essential value of the donor's contribution to the continuation of the project. Dhammakāya Foundation teaching flags up the importance of making merit (Thai *tham bun*); if we give now we will have it returned to us, not by God, but by the process of *karma*. From the Buddhist perspective this is all true, but to specify maturation dates and quantify the fruit of *karmic* effort is to commodify the merit-making process and make it rather mechanical and deterministic.

Use of typologies to classify Wat Phra Dhammakāya

Glock and Stark's deprivation model

Deprivation refers to 'any and all of the ways that an individual or group may be, or feel disadvantaged in comparison either to other individuals or groups, or to an internalized set of standards' (Glock and Stark, 1965:246). Deprivation tends to be accompanied by a desire to overcome it, except when it is legitimised by

society, for example, in the Hindu caste system. Glock and Stark put forward a development of Merton's idea that social changes arise because of an imbalance between cultural goals and the cultural means to attain them. 'Groups and individuals lacking these cultural means may be seen as deprived' (Bernard and Burgess, 1996:332). A sense of deprivation is a precondition for the emergence of a new social or religious movement but it is not sufficient in itself. Also required are the additional conditions that the deprivation be shared, that no alternative institutional arrangements for its resolution are perceived, and that a leadership emerge with an innovating idea for building a movement out of the existing deprivation (Glock and Stark, 1965:249).

Glock and Stark identify five types of deprivation (Bernard and Burgess, 1996:333; Glock and Stark, 1965:248) but only 'psychic deprivation' may be identified as a feature of Wat Phra Dhammakāya. Psychic deprivation may arise when people experience a lack of a meaningful value system around which to organise their lives. Such a condition may well be caused by a perceived social exclusion and may result in disillusionment or despair. The quest for a faith, ethic or experience is an attempt to address this deprivation. Psychic deprivation may categorise many well-educated, morally principled Thai, especially those who live in an urban context. Traditional sermons in a typical temple may well be perceived as irrelevant by those within this grouping. In contrast, Wat Phra Dhammakāya readily establishes credibility as a result of its well-educated monastics and efficiently run programme. It demonstrates an understanding of the needs and aspirations of the urban middle class, and offers an approach to life that sees no tension between increasing prosperity and spiritual development. The temple emphasises purity of life and the means to achieve that – *Dhammakāya* meditation. Here then may be found relevant teaching, and a purpose in life, that is, participating as a lay person in the life and work of Wat Phra Dhammakāya. Wat Phra Dhammakāya is a homogenous unit characterised by both the prosperity of its members and their desire to take religion seriously. The movement offers a religious system and network which re-enchants its members. These people have found that aspects of traditional Buddhist teaching/temple attendance do not resonate with their lifestyle and expectations as well-educated (and usually considerably prosperous) Thai.

While psychic deprivation is the only category within Glock and Stark's typology that may be applied to Wat Phra Dhammakāya, it is interesting to note clear signs of 'organismic deprivation' in the sick who went to Luang Phaw Sot for healing. Indeed, under his leadership, Wat Paknam was the focal point of a healing movement. Mettānando (1999:1) confirms this when he writes 'After the end of World War II, the monastery had established itself as a renowned centre for healing meditation which attracted hundreds of visitors everyday'. Organismic deprivation is caused by some form of disability, addiction or illness. Advances in medical treatment, and an empowering of the disabled in some parts of the world mean this is a reduced category.[62] Along with other high-level meditators, Luang Phaw Sot exercised a healing ministry. These meditators would seek to

determine the cause of the illness through meditation and then give relevant advice. If the reason for the illness was physical [as opposed to *karmic* fruit] the meditators 'would use the power of meditation to adjust the patient's internal functioning along with the administration of herbal medicine' (Dhammakāya Publications, 1998:71). With significant advances in medical science and the development of government hospitals, there is now much less dependence on monastics as healers. Organismic deprivation, however, cannot be seen as part of the reason for the growth of the Wat Phra Dhammakāya movement. Temple members tend to be affluent and thus able to afford the best of health care. Those not in this category will certainly benefit from recent increased accessibility to low-cost government medical care.

Bryan Wilson's typology

Bryan Wilson (Bernard and Burgess, 1996:333; Wilson, 1973:18–30) talks of sects being ideological movements whose aim is maintaining and (perhaps even) propagating certain ideological positions. These positions are the result of the response of a movement to the belief that salvation from evil is no longer to be found within the tradition they have left. Wilson describes seven such positions, two of which are held and propagated by Wat Phra Dhammakāya members.

First, there is a 'conversionist' element to Wat Phra Dhammakāya. 'Salvation is seen not as available through objective agencies but only by a profoundly felt, supernatural transformation of the self' (Wilson, 1973:22). The world is transformed through changed lives. A member may view attendance at the temple and a cell group, along with making some progress in meditation and change of behaviour as evidence of conversion. Temple members familiar with the Black and White *Dhammakāya* myth believe that their association with the temple will keep them safe from forthcoming conflicts with the Black *Dhammakāya*. The 'commodifying' nature of the temple's teaching, for example, giving a certain sum of money to the temple to guarantee avoidance of a particular hell, creates a confidence in achieving salvation from specific torturous rebirths. The more a member gives, the more he/she will be delivered from suffering and spiritual conflict.

Second, one can discern a 'thaumaturgical' aspect to the movement, that is, a belief that it is possible to experience the supernatural or ultimate reality in everyday living. 'The individual's concern is relief from present and specific skills by specific dispensations. The demand for supernatural help is personal and local: its operation is magical' (Wilson, 1973:22). Wat Phra Dhammakāya members have a deep belief that the practice of *Dhammakāya* meditation can produce extraordinary results.[63] Benefits of such meditation are understood to include an increased performance in the work place and the ability to resist temptations to engage in unskilful practice (*akusala*). A new world opens up to the meditator who engages in *Dhammakāya* meditation. The centre of the body becomes the place to observe and understand emerging images, and to adjust one's understanding of reality

accordingly. In a sermon prior to the cremation of Khun Yai Chan, Phra Dattacheewo said:

> Many people from the temple would tell Khun Yai Chan some of their amazing experiences, perhaps of seeing a huge building or strange animal while on an overseas trip. Khun Yai, however, never expressed surprise or excitement because what she had seen inside herself was more amazing than what they had seen in their travels.[64]

In addition to that which arises within, the meditator may develop a heightening of the senses or other special qualities. After one session of *Dhammakāya* meditation, one member informed me that his sense of hearing became so acute he could hear the sound of insects moving in the grass by the roadside.[65] Another component to the thaumaturgical nature of Wat Phra Dhammakāya is Phra Dhammachayo's presenting of donors' offerings to the Buddhas in *āyatananibbāna*.[66] The conversionist and thuamaturgical categories of Wilson's typology are clearly in evidence to an outsider observing the Wat Phra Dhammakāya movement.

Roy Wallis' typology

Wat Phra Dhammakāya is a 'world-affirming' New Religious Movement, and resonates with a number of Wallis' observations of movements he places in this category. Wat Phra Dhammakāya has been heavily criticised in the media for its robust recruiting strategy, as well as its alleged pressurising of people to donate to the temple's many projects. There is congruence with Wat Phra Dhammakāya's practice and the world-affirming category of Wallis' typology. Wallis (2003:52) writes,

> As the world-affirming movement does not reject the world and its organization, it will quite happily model itself upon those aspects of the world which are useful to the movement's purpose. The salvational commodity includes a set of ideas, skills and techniques which can be marketed like any other commodity since no sense of the sacred renders such marketing inappropriate (as it might, for example in, say, the idea of marketing the Mass, or Holy Communion).

Wat Phra Dhammakāya members have joined the movement for precisely the same reason that people join other world-affirming movements. That is, 'not to escape or withdraw from the world and its values, but to acquire the means to achieve them more easily and to experience the world's benefits more fully' (Wallis, 2003:46).

There is, however, some dissonance between Wat Phra Dhammakāya and other world-affirming movements in the area of collectiveness. Individualism and self-realisation mean that 'collective activities have little or no sacred quality and

indeed are likely to have only a small place in the enterprise' (Wallis, 2003:49).[67] Wat Phra Dhammakāya members engage in meditating together as a group. They believe that it is easier to obtain a more positive individual outcome when meditating together, rather than meditating in isolation. In addition, there is the strong conviction that a greater power is generated when members meditate together. This is partly why Wat Phra Dhammakāya places such importance on meditating together each Sunday morning. Indeed, on these occasions satellite technology is used to create a link-up with members throughout the world. Skilled meditators meditating in teams was a distinctive of Luang Phaw Sot's practice at Wat Paknam. This practice was engaged in to generate power against negative forces including the Black *Dhammakāya*, which according to the *Dhammakāya* discourse, causes mankind to remain in a deluded state.

Lance Cousin's categories

Our final set of categories is taken from Cousins' (1997:408–11) observations on recent trends within Theravāda Buddhism. The three germane to Wat Phra Dhammakāya are: 'Buddhist modernism', 'revival of meditation' and 'Theravāda Tantrism'.

Buddhist modernism includes 'some customs and values based upon Christian practices' (Cousins, 1997:410). Wat Phra Dhammakāya meet on Sundays rather than on Buddhist holy days which occur four times each month according to the four main lunar phases. The meeting of members in weekly cell groups and their working together on various tasks, for example, recruiting, are similar to the practices of some of the large, new Bangkok churches. Perhaps these patterns of operation have led to the development of the rumour that Wat Phra Dhammakāya was borrowing some ideas from Christianity. Indeed, some have suggested that Christianity was seeking to destabilise Buddhism in Thailand through influencing the temple's beliefs and practice, thus bringing it into conflict with the *Saṅgha*.[68]

The essential feature of Wat Phra Dhammakāya is its extremely strong focus on *Dhammakāya* meditation. Wat Phra Dhammakāya has over 60,000 lay members who practice *Dhammakāya* meditation. It is practiced in cell groups, and there are midweek classes at the temple as well as on Sunday. Vocational groups, for example, nurses and soldiers, as well as children's groups visit the temple and are introduced to *Dhammakāya* meditation. Through the use of satellite technology Wat Phra Dhammakāya groups throughout the world screen the Sunday morning meditation meeting held at the main temple. Members, regardless of location, are thus able to participate in the programme of meditation which takes place. As already mentioned, it is particularly important for all members to join in the offering made to the Buddhas in *nibbāna* on the first Sunday of each month. This is normally led by Phra Dhammachayo. The strong focus on meditation by monks, novices, *ubasok* and *ubasika* is paralleled by Wat Phra Dhammakāya's lay members. This resonates with Cousins observation of the revival of meditation within Buddhism in the twentieth century.

The final category drawn from Cousins' trends in modern Southern Buddhism is esotericism. It is sometimes referred to as Theravādin Tantrism. While such practices may be viewed as coming out of the Indian Tantric tradition, Cousins is correct to suggest 'it may be better to avoid so specific a terminology' (1997:410). Wat Phra Dhammakāya's meditative practice may well have had its genesis in esoteric Theravāda Buddhism which survived the Thammayut reforms of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Within the Luang Phaw Sot and Wat Phra Dhammakāya traditions, however, the teaching of this model of meditation has been exoteric. That said, monks from Wat Paknam and Wat Phra Dhammakāya are reluctant to talk about higher meditation and spiritual warfare (Thai *wicha-rop*) between the forces of good and evil.

In the following chapter the Dhammakāya meditative technique is described.[69] This includes use of a crystal sphere being drawn into the centre of the body via five resting points. The five smaller spheres associated with the sighting of the crystal sphere at the centre of the body are also mentioned. This is viewed by Bowers (1996:33–45) as an indication that Tibetan Tantric practice was the source of the *Dhammakāya* model of meditation. The use of the *Sammā Arahaṃ mantra* is also an important part of the ritual of the visualisation of the crystal sphere. Progress in meditative skill, mental purity and insight are indicated by the brightness of the spheres, their content and ultimately the width of the *Dhammakāya* figures. There are connections here between the *Dhammakāya* technique and some of the points Cousins (1997b:194–7) makes vis-á-vis visualisations within the human body and knowledge of higher realities. The Yogāvacara tradition is an alternative term for Esoteric Southern Buddhism or Tantric Theravāda. A number of similarities between *Dhammakāya* meditation and the Yogāvacara tradition are discussed in Chapter 4.[70] This suggests that Wat Phra Dhammakāya lies within Cousins' category of Esoteric Southern Buddhism.

Conclusion

From an insider's (emic) *perspective*

Wat Phra Dhammakāya members have every reason to be proud of its efficiently run temple and programmes with its well-educated monastics and lay staff. There is a strong belief in the efficacy of *Dhammakāya* meditation and affirmation for keeping the Five Precepts. A materialistic lifestyle is not censored, indeed, *Dhammakāya* meditation and networking at the temple help members to achieve greater prosperity. Association with the movement may contribute to members believing that their wealth will be protected during a period of economic recession. There is also the confidence among some members that they will be safe in future conflict between the Black and White *Dhammakāya* as they are following a leader with has great power (*amnāt*) and charisma (*pāramī*).

Sōka Gakkai is a lay movement, while Wat Phra Dhammakāya has a very strong monastic focus.[71] Nevertheless, the following similarities have been identified between the two movements: readily understood teaching; prosperity now; excellent publicity; restoration of national significance through global expansion; a sense of belonging, and recruiting and fund-raising techniques. While both Sōka Gakkai and Wat Phra Dhammakāya have attracted fierce criticism in their respective contexts, Wat Phra Dhammakāya has not been publicly critical of the Thai *Saṅgha* and has remained within it. Sōka Gakkai, on the other hand, was highly critical of the Nichiren Shoshū priests and eventually withdrew from their relationship with them.

From an outsider's **(etic)** *perspective*

It is suggested that a reasonable outsider's perspective of Wat Phra Dhammakāya is of a Buddhist prosperity movement with some millenarian and fundamentalist characteristics. Wat Phra Dhammakāya, as we have seen, encourages members to be prosperous and generous in giving to the various projects of the temple. Temple administration encourages member-giving by creatively identifying projects such as purchasing a square metre of granite for the terrace surrounding the *cetiya*, or purchasing an image of the Buddha to be located in the *cetiya*. Donations to projects take place in large public meetings, or may be received by a particular monk by special arrangement. On occasions, but not nearly as much as one would expect, Wat Phra Dhammakāya suggests specific results for particular donations. An example of this is guaranteed wealth (termed a 'millionaire-for-ever') in subsequent lives for the donor who commits to providing 1,000 Baht (£17) a month for the temple's food bill for the rest of his/her life.

Despite its progressive nature, Wat Phra Dhammakāya may be described as fundamentalist, and millenarian. The myth regarding an ultimate 'showdown' between White and Black *Dhammakāya*, and Phra Dhammachayo being an *Avatāra* and part of the original White *Dhammakāya* party indicate a millenarian mindset. What is unclear is the extent of acceptance of the myth among Wat Phra Dhammakāya members. How many is 'many Wat Phra Dhammakāya devotees believe their movement is their last train to world salvation'? (Ekachai, 1998:9).[72] While lineage is important to Wat Phra Dhammakāya, this does not alter the faith of 'many' members who believe in Phra Dhammachayo's ability to ensure their continuing prosperity and ultimate deliverance from the destructive forces of the Black *Dhammakāya*.

Categories of various typologies developed by those working in the field of New Religious Movements were examined and particular resonance was observed between Wat Phra Dhammakāya and the categories of *physic depravation* (Glock and Stark) and *conversionist* and *thaumaturgical* (Wilson). 'World-affirming' (Wallis) is a clearly discernable characteristic within the movement. Cousins'

observations on recent trends in Theravāda Buddhism could be particularly identified in the Wat Phra Dhammakāya movement in the areas of *Buddhist modernism, revival of meditation* and *Theravāda Tantrism*. The application of these typologies causes us to examine Wat Phra Dhammakāya from a variety of perspectives and thus achieve a more accurate understanding of the movement. It also indicates that Wat Phra Dhammakāya has some of the characteristics exhibited by other New Religious Movements.

As already identified, the principle concept of Wat Phra Dhammakāya is spiritual development through the practice of *Dhammakāya* meditation. This is the subject of Chapter 4.

4

THE APPROACH OF WAT PHRA DHAMMAKĀYA TO SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

Wat Phra Dhammakāya's understanding of *nibbāna*

The traditional Thai Buddhist perspective of *nibbāna* follows the Theravāda approach of *nibbāna* with substrate,[1] and *nibbāna* without substrate.[2] The first term refers to the arahat's experience of nibbāna while still alive. The second term is used in reference to the arahat nibbānic condition, post death.

The position of 'doctrinal' Thai Buddhism is that the Buddha helps us by his example and teachings. However, he is unable to actively help us now as he has passed into *nibbāna* without substrate and we should not seek his help as we are all responsible to help ourselves. This remoteness is difficult to live with for many Thai people facing the rigours of daily living without any form of national health service and social security etc. That said, the chanting (and listening to the chanting) of passages from the Pāli scriptures (*parittas*) provide comfort and allegedly secures safety and blessing partly through the pleasing and subsequent assistance of gods who are devotees of the Buddha, as well as by helping to arouse wholesome qualities in chanters and listeners and drawing on the teachings of the Buddha (Harvey, 1990:181). Nevertheless, for a high percentage of Thai people, *nibbāna* is remote, abstract and even unattractive. The quest for merit in order to have a better rebirth seems a more attractive option than enduring the demands placed on the one seeking enlightenment. Thus '*karmatic*' rather than '*nibbānic*' Buddhism characterises the average Thai Buddhist.[3]

'*Nibbāna* is *atta*' (self) is a pithy phrase which sums up the *Dhammakāya* understanding of *nibbāna*. It is designed to reflect the movement's understanding of *nibbāna* as being a place where the Buddhas reside and concretise what is considered by the average Thai as abstract (and possibly irrelevant). Critics of the movement may say that this is part of the 'commodifying' of their brand of Buddhism. In the three Dhammakāya traditions in Thailand, *nibbāna* is described 'as a permanent blissful realm where the Buddha and other enlightened ones reside after death' (*Bangkok Post,* 21.12.98). This is not referring to the state of *anupādisesa* (*nibbāna* without substrate) but a physical location called *āyatananibbāna* (a sphere/realm of *nibbāna*).[4] The Dhammakāya understanding is that all enlightened beings exist for ever in *āyatananibbāna* in a permanent,

perfect and unchanging world beyond *saṃsāra*.[5] Scholar-monk Phra Dhammapiṭaka appears to take the view that the term *āyatananibbāna* is erroneous, and simply another way of referring to the state of the enlightened person who is free from the fires of greed, hatred and delusion. He comments (1998:80–6) that there is a lot of speculation about *nibbāna* and rather than define the concept for others, one should look within to see if defilements are decreasing.

Phra Rajyanvisith, abbot of Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāya, writes that all compounds, or conditioned things are non-self but these do not include the non-compound (unconditioned phenomena) like *nibbāna* (Jayamanggalo, 1991:45). Classical Theravāda Buddhism, in contrast, views *nibbāna* as non-self. Indeed, Phra Dhammapiṭaka (1988:9) writes that Wat Phra Dhammakāya do not stick to the Pāli canon, and in absolute terms, there is no such thing as *atta*. In the Luang Phaw Sot tradition it is taught that the Five Aggregates (as they are conditioned phenomena) cannot possess the *nibbānic* condition). The *nibbānic* condition can, however, be possessed by the *Dhammakāya* (which is unconditioned). The meditator who achieves the *Dhamma*-body of Arahatship (*Dhammakāya Arahatta*) achieves the *nibbāna* condition. Such a person may, through the power of higher *Dhammakāya* meditation, visit *āyatananibbāna*. In the three Dhammakāya traditions in Thailand *Dhammakāya* is understood as being within everyone, that is buddha-nature waiting to be realised.

The Mahāyāna triple-body doctrine (*Tri-kāya*)

The Transformation-body, Enjoyment-body and *Dharma*-body are three aspects of Buddhahood in the Mahāyāna tradition (Harvey, 1990:126). *Nirmāṇakāya* is 'the temporal form, in which the Buddha appears like an ordinary mortal and teaches the *Dhamma* through ordinary language' (Klostermaier, 1999:40). This, according to the Mahāyānists, is the main focus of non-Mahāyāna traditions. A Mahāyāna two-fold development prior to the Yogācāra school of philosophy made a distinction between the bodily appearance of the historical Buddha, and the essence of his nature. This was further developed to divide the appearance of the historical Buddha in two ways, or as two bodies, the Transformation-body (*nirmāṇakāya*) and the Enjoyment-body (*saṃbhogakāya*).

The Transformation-body refers to 'earthly Buddhas, seen as teaching devices compassionately projected into the world to show people the path to Buddhahood' (Harvey, 1990:126). *Nirmāṇakāya* is sometimes translated 'apparition body' or 'phantom body' and 'is the physical manifestation of Buddhahood, the ordinary perishable form, as exemplified by the "historical Buddha" ' (Harrison, 1992:44). Cabezón, (2000:26) is not alone among Buddhists in viewing Jesus as a transformation-body, or *nirmāṇakāya*. Indeed, Harvey (1990:126) mentions that D.T. Suzuki viewed some religious teachers from non-Buddhist traditions as Transformation-bodies, appearing in a form appropriate to a particular culture. There is interesting speculation (e.g. Keith, 1923:271; Thomas, 1933:243;

Williams, 1989:178) about the nature of such a body: is it a 'real' body of flesh and blood, or is it simply 'like' a human body, as the Mahāsāṅghikas taught? A Yogācāra interpretation of a *nirmāṇakāya* appearance would be that it is 'seen to be only an appearance in the mind-stream of others, with no direct mind-stream of its own other than that of the projecting *sambhogakāya*' (Harvey, 2003:8).[6] A similar but less complex debate was hotly contested in Christianity in the fourth century, in Egypt.[7]

The Enjoyment-body (*saṃbhogakāya*) can be described in general terms as a subtle physical body. It may be regarded as a 'more exalted and splendid manifestation of the enlightened personality' (Harrison, 1992:44) but regardless of how glorious and long-lived it is, it is not eternal. The Enjoyment-body is adopted by heavenly Buddhas for their own enjoyment as well as for the benefit and enjoyment of the *Bodhisattvas* in the heavenly realms.[8] According to Harvey (1990:127), in the Yogācāra school *Dharmakāya* 'is what is known and realised on attaining Buddhahood, it is *nirvāṇa*' and 'It is regarded as having a very subtle, shining, limitless material form from which speech can come.'

Towards an understanding of Theravādan and Wat Phra Dhammakāya views of *Dhammakāya*

The Theravāda tradition generally understands the term *Dhammakāya* as the teachings and moral greatness that was the Buddha's, and which exists today in the teachings of the Buddha contained in the Pāli canon. The physical body of the Buddha (*rūpakāya*) is represented by certain *stūpas*, or *cetiyas*. Thus, *Dhammakāya* and *rūpakāya* are the two legacies of the Buddha, and key symbols of Buddhism. Those who practise *Dhammakāya* meditation, however, also understand *Dhammakāya* to be 'the supra-mundane body which is of the purest element and is not compound. It is not subject to the three characteristics of *anicca, dukkha* and *anattā*' (Jayamanggalo, 1991:108).

There is a history of Theravāda ideas on spiritual 'bodies'. Theravādins have emphasised the importance of the physical (*karma* formed) body of the Buddha (*rūpakāya*). They also taught that a mind-made body (*manomayakāya*) could be created by the power of the mind of the Buddha, and indeed by others who could achieve *jhāna*. This mind-made body is separate and distinct from the physical body. Indeed having attained this body the Buddha was 'able to visit the various heavenly realms where the Brahmā deities live' (Reynolds, 1976–77:379). The meditator who wishes to create the *manomayakāya*[9] should do so on emerging from the basic *jhāna*. The meditator, as regards the physical body should

> resolve [to] 'Let it become hollow.' It will become hollow. Then he adverts to another body inside it, and having done the preliminary work in the way described, he resolves 'Let there be another body inside it.' Then he draws it out like a reed from its sheath, like a sword from its scabbard, like a snake from its slough.
>
> (Buddhaghosa, 1979:444)

In addition to *rūpakāya* and *manomayakāya*, *Dhammakāya* (in a sense other than the teachings and moral greatness that was the Buddha's) was also accepted by some in the Theravāda tradition. The fifteenth-century compendium entitled *Saddharmharatnākaraya* written by the Sinhalese forest monk Venerable Dhammadinnacariya Wimalakitti, contains some new perspectives on *Dhammakāya* which are also in keeping with the traditional Theravāda texts (Reynolds, 1976–77:380). Reynolds focuses on Venerable Dhammadinnacariya's division of the Buddha's attainments into three bodies, that is, *Dhammakāya, nimittakāya* (which is conditioned) and a s*ūñyakāya* or emptiness body. In the text the *Dhammakāya* is the body which is seen by the wisdom eye of those who are endowed with the *Dharmātma*, or *Dharma*-self (which chases away evil and brings happiness). The *Dhammakāya* is seen by those who have attained the eight *jhānas*, the five *abhiññās* (higher knowledge) and the four types of analytical knowledge. Reynolds (1976–77:381) argues that the *Dhammakāya* in 'this more limited sense appears, in this new context, to be the direct successor of the *manomayakāya* [a supra-normal, mind produced body] of the canon and commentaries.' Harrison, however, points out that some believe the *manomayakāya* 'to be a forerunner of the *saṃbhogakāya*'. (Harrison 1992:46).

The *nimittakāya* (sign-body), according to the *Saddharmaratnākaraya*, remains congruent to the traditional Theravāda understanding of *Dhammakāya*, as it is concerned with the eight supra-worldly stages of the path and the attainment of *nibbāna*. Reynolds (1976–77:381) points out the two adjustments that have taken place. First, the supra-worldly nature of the *nimittakāya* has been compromised with the association of 'all but the most exalted stages of the path with the divine realms in the Buddhist cosmological schema and by associating it with the divine eye which, in the traditional Theravāda perspective, has the capacity to perceive beings within the cosomological hierarchy'. Second, the *nibbāna* attained with the attainment of *nimittakāya* is *soapādisesa nibbāna* (*nibbāna* in which certain remnants still exist). This has resulted in the introduction of a fourth body – the *sūñyakāya*, or emptiness body. This is associated with *anupādisesa nibbāna* a state in which absolutely nothing conditioned remains. It is a 'body' which has no death or change of any nature.

It is important to explore understandings of *Dhammakāya* and ways in which it may have developed. The three Thai Dhammakāya fraternities, however, would view any understanding of *Dhammakāya* as being produced or created by the meditator (as is the case with the *manomayakāya*) as erroneous. To equate *Dhammakāya* with *nimittakāya* would be seen as a downgrading of *Dhammakāya* as *nimittakāya* is conditioned. *Dhammakāya* in the Dhammakāya tradition is seen as buddha-nature, or the immortal body which exists within everyone. It is immortal because this supra-mundane body it is not composed of the Five Aggregates and is not subject to the three characteristics of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā* (Jayamanggalo, 1997:156). Within *Dhammakāya*, according to those in the Dhammakāya tradition, reside all ultimate truths, and qualities that make the Buddha, a Buddha. The extent to which the meditator is able to view the

Dhammakāya (which has ontological existence) will depend upon his/her mental purity and meditative prowess.

The *Dhammakāya* meditative technique

The meditator visualises a crystal sphere the size of his fingertip floating in front of his face. The crystal sphere is drawn in through the right nostril, (left if the practitioner is female). The meditator visualises the sphere at five[10] other points before it reaches the central part of the body.[11] At each point the *sammā arahaṃ mantra* is repeated three times.[12] The *mantra* continues to be used until the visualized sphere is stabilised in the centre of the body, and the meditator has firmly focused on the centre of the crystal sphere. (This visualisation technique for bringing the mind to the centre of the body is not normally necessary for experienced meditators). Attachments are seen to pull the mind outside the body, the greater the attachments, the further the mind drifts. The bringing back of one's mind to the 'true centre of our being' is seen to bring an inner peace 'but this is only a dim reflection of the deep happiness that comes from the mind firmly at a standstill' (Dattajeevo, 1995:31).

When the mind is brought to a position of rest at the very centre of the mediator's body then there is the first sighting of the *paṭhama-magga* sphere, also referred to as the *Dhamma* sphere.[13] The attaining of this first sighting of the sphere is an important achievement for the meditator, as an unwholesome person could not advance to this stage. Some virtuous meditators, however, do not reach this level as they have poor concentration powers. Such people have the consolation that *Dhammakāya* meditation has a calming effect on the mind, even though they are unable to visualise the bright crystal sphere. The attaining of the first sighting of the sphere appears similar to attaining access concentration in *samatha* meditation.

Further concentration on the centre of the *paṭhama-magga* or *Dhamma* sphere will cause a brighter, more refined sphere, known as the sphere of moral conduct, or *sīla*, to arise. 'Through this sphere, we can refine physical, verbal and mental deeds more efficiently and on a deeper level than through common morality' (Jayamanggalo, 1991:66). This purification process can be described as higher morality (*adhisīla*).

As the mind remains at rest and focus continues on the centre of the sphere of higher moral conduct, a brighter more refined sphere will arise in its place. This is known as the sphere of *samādhi* or mental concentration. As the mind 'rests still and deep in *samādhi* at this stage, it will destroy the Five Hindrances (lust, malice, sloth, anxiety and doubt about practice) and goodness will be attained. This is the first stage of absorption [*jhāna*]' (Jayamanggalo, 1991:66). The mind at this stage is ready to practice insight meditation in order to gain wisdom, and can be described as being in a position of 'higher mind' (*adhicitta*).

The sphere of wisdom (*paññā*) is the next sphere to arise; this is followed by the sphere of liberation (*vimutti*). As this sphere is kept pure through meditation, the

sphere of knowledge and vision of liberation (*vimutti-nāṇadassana*) emerges, this is the sixth and final sphere encountered by the *Dhammakāya* meditator. In summary, the six spheres appear in the following order; the *paṭhama-magga* or *Dhamma* sphere, *sīla, samādhi, paññā, vimutti* and finally the *vimutti-ñāṇadassana* sphere, a term normally used for Arahatship.

As the mind is further concentrated, a crude human form (*paṇita-manussakāya*) emerges from the centre of the *vimutti-ñāṇadassana* sphere. This is the first in a sequence of eight inner bodies. A meditation teacher informed me that meditation practitioners are not told in advance about what will arise in the centre of this sixth sphere; yet when they reach this stage and are asked to describe what they have seen, they all describe a Buddha in the lotus position. When asked to describe the face of the Buddha, each meditator describes his/her own face without realising it.

The next step in the process is focusing on the centre of the first body until the refined human body (*panita-manussakāya*) appears. 'When this body appears at the centre of the mediator's body, he/she is instructed to let the body expand in order to become that body' (Bowers, 1996:17).

The next body to appear is the crude 'celestial body' (*dibbakāya*); this expands to become the 'refined celestial body' (*panita-dibbakāya*). In turn this gives way to the crude 'form Brahmā body' (*rūpabrahmakāya*), which has inside it the 'refined form Brahmā body' (*panita-rūpabrahmakāya*). In the final stages the crude 'formless Brahmā body' (*arūpabrahmakāya*) arises and expands to become the 'refined formless Brahmā body' (*panita-arūpabramakāya*). This series of bodies seems to broadly correspond to the meditative development up to the four *jhānas*, through them, and then the four formless meditation attainments.

The body that arises from the formless Brahmā body is the first of five *Dhammakāya* bodies; as with the previous bodies, these bodies have both a normal and refined form. Physical descriptions of these bodies are the same, and so their size is important in order to identify what kind of '*Dhammakāya* body' is seen. The size of the normal and refined *Dhammakāya* bodies are the same, the difference is one of purity, or brightness. These *Dhammakāya* bodies are simply a way of measuring attainment in *Dhamma* practice. The following information is adapted from Jayamanggalo, 1997:70–4 and Bowers, 1996:22–3:

- *Dhammakāya-Gotrabhu* (*gotrabhu* Pāli) means 'a change of lineage', a traditional term for one on the brink of stream entry); this has a height and lap-width of 9 metres or more;
- *Dhammakāya-Sota* this has a height and lap-width of 10 metres or more, a meditator able to see this body has reached stream entry, is a *Sotāpanna* and has embarked on the Noble Path. Such a person will experience full enlightenment within seven lives;
- *Dhammakāya-Sakadāgāmi* this has the height and lap-width of 20 metres or more, a meditator able to experience this body has become a Once-returner, and will return to this sense-desire world one more time as a human or lower god, any other rebirths will be in a higher heaven;

- *Dhammakāya-Anāgami* this has the height and lap-width of 30 metres or more. This penultimate level is achieved by a Non-returner who will never be reborn in a sense-desire world, as a result of having destroyed all ill will and all subtle sensuous desires;
- *Dhammakāya-Arahatta* this has a height and lap-width of 40 metres or more. This is the ultimate level in the *Dhammakāya* meditative system, and only the *Arahat*, (one who has destroyed all fetters and illusions) can view this *kāya*. If the meditator at this level can successfully focus his mental energy on becoming the refined *Dhammakāya-arahatta*, he/she will reach *āyatananibbāna*, even if only on a temporary basis. According to the *Dhammakāya* tradition, this is where the Buddha and the *Arahats* exist forever.

Personal experience of meditation at Wat Phra Dhammakāya

As already noted, Wat Phra Dhammakāya members believe that *Dhammakāya* meditation is suitable for people of all faiths, or none. While sitting in on a number of meditation sessions at Wat Phra Dhammakāya, the only formal training I received was a session with Phra Nicholas Thanissaro. Knowing I was a Christian, he invited me to substitute my own words for the *sammā arahaṃ mantra* and to select my own image if I did not wish to use a crystal sphere. I was able to concentrate on the substitute image two fingers breadth above the navel. The inside of my body appeared grey and cloudy, although the ideal is to visualise a clear interior. I also noticed my head falling to one side and felt that I was falling asleep. According to Wat Phra Dhammakāya members, this is a result of the mind moving from the head to the centre of the body. I was surprised to discover that the image I was focusing on became smaller and spun around, and it was as if I was being drawn into a mental journey that led into a world with which I was unfamiliar. To prevent that journey continuing, I focused on restoring the mental picture of my chosen image. I lost track of time, and was disappointed when Phra Nicholas drew the exercise to a close as I found it to be physically and mentally refreshing.

It is very easy to understand the attraction of *Dhammakāya* meditation. In my case it quickly delivered a sense of mental and physical well-being. I felt that to have embarked on the journey I described would have brought a heightened sense of calmness and mental power. The presenting nature of this journey, however, indicated a Buddhist pathway and to take it would have meant considerable adjustment in my Christian commitment. Phra Nicholas made the point that images which arise during meditation should be explored; the implication being that they may lead us into a deeper understanding of reality. I can well understand how *Dhammakāya* meditators find their practice refreshing and invigorating, and why many would wish to spend considerable periods of time meditating. The exercise highlighted the importance of having the support of a meditation teacher, not only to assist in the developing of skills but also to discuss what has arisen

during the process. Lay *Dhammakāya* meditators have stressed to me the importance of being supervised whilst meditating, indicating that unguided meditation may be dangerous. One *Dhammakāya* meditator, knowing of my interest in the subject offered to guide me in meditation. He said

> It is dangerous if a meditator is not supervised; a meditator needs to have a teacher. The teacher is aware of the mind of the meditator and guards it, keeping it safe from spiritual attack, because there is conflict between the Black and White Buddha. If there is moral purity in the life of the meditator then he will be safe from the evil forces. The relationship with the teacher will continue after the teacher passes away, and it is very important to understand that progress in meditation depends on the *pāramī* of the teacher.[14]

Examination of two theories regarding the development of *Dhammakāya* meditation in Thailand

Tibetan Buddhism as a possible source of the **Dhammakāya** *meditation technique*

Bowers (1996:33–45) points to a number of similarities between *Dhammakāya* meditation and Tibetan Tantric meditation practices and believes it possible that Luang Phaw Sot may have come across some Tibetan Tantric practices while studying at Wat Po (also known as Wat Phra Chetuphon), a cosmopolitan Bangkok temple where monks passing through the city would visit and often stay for a number of nights. Meditative techniques are an important topic of discussion in monastic circles and it is feasible that Luang Phaw Sot himself heard of a Tibetan meditation model there. Meditators in the Dhammakāya tradition do not accept this theory.[15] They hold that Luang Phaw Sot discovered the meditation method 'used by the Buddha'. Phra Mettānando suggests that

> [W]hen *Dhammakāya* meditation was lost five hundred years after the Buddha's passing away, that the system could have moved into Tibet.[16] Lacking the qualified monks to maintain the system caused it to fall into the confused state Tantric meditation appears in today.
>
> (Bowers, 1966:44)

Initially, there appears to be some similarity between the crystal sphere system in the Dhammakāya tradition and the *maṇḍala*[17] of the cosmic Buddhas found in the Tibetan tradition.[18]

Although not mentioned thus far, *Dhammakāya* meditation teaches that five smaller spheres are components of the larger *paṭhama-magga* or *Dhamma* sphere. Unfortunately, permission to reproduce this diagram was not granted. The following is, therefore, a verbal description of the visualised *paṭhama-magga*

or *Dhamma* sphere. In the centre of this sphere is a space in which the consciousness element or *viññaṇadhātu* is located. The function of this small sphere is to control consciousness, while the space element in which it is located controls the various gaps within the body. From that central spherical space within which the consciousness element is located, four thin, bright, clear lines extend outwards in the direction of the four cardinal points of the compass, to connect to the four other spheres. These four spheres are located within the circumference of the *paṭhama-magga* or *Dhamma* sphere. They are as follows:

- Water element, located at the front of the *paṭhama-magga* or *Dhamma* sphere. This sphere controls the fluid function of the body;
- Earth element, located on the right side of the *paṭhama-magga* or *Dhamma* sphere. The function of this sphere is the control of the solid parts of the body;
- Fire element, located at the rear of the *paṭhama-magga* or *Dhamma* sphere. This sphere controls body temperature;
- Wind element, located on the left side of the *paṭhama-magga* or *Dhamma* sphere. This sphere controls the movement of gases within the body.

(Jayamanggalo, 1997:64–5)[19]

Initially, there appears to be some similarity between the *paṭhama-magga* or *Dhamma* sphere in the *Dhammakāya* tradition and the *maṇḍala*[20] of the cosmic Buddhas found in the Tibetan tradition. Figure 4.1 is a model of the cosmic Buddhas *maṇḍala*. Both the *maṇḍala* and the *paṭhama-magga* or *Dhamma* sphere have a central sphere surrounded by four outer spheres. In a recent visit to Samye Ling Tibetan Buddhist monastery,[21] a nun commented that there is a space in the centre of the *maṇḍala* (not indicated in Figure 4.1).[22] In the Dhammakāya tradition, *Dhammakāya*, or buddha-nature, lies within each person. It is realised by meditation on a visualised crystal sphere within. In the Tibetan system, the *Vajra*-being appears to be the equivalent of *Dhammakāya*, the enlightened mind.[23] Both are considered to be of great radiance and purity.

It would appear that the similarities between the Tibetan and *Dhammakāya* meditative systems are restricted to five spheres being laid out in a similar pattern. In the Tibetan cosmic *maṇḍala* a Buddha is visualised, indeed the sphere is the Pure-Land or domain of a particular Buddha. Specific qualities (signified by a *mudrā* or hand gesture) are associated with each Buddha. An example of this is Ratnasaṃbhava, who is depicted with his palm facing outwards in the gesture of giving (*dāna-mudrā*), the gift given to the world is the Three Jewels *Tri ratna*.[24] Ratnasaṃbhava 'radiates forth as the yellow light of the Wisdom of Equality' (Govinda, 1969:120) and is associated with the element of earth. The wisdom associated with this Buddha is the 'Wisdom of the Great Mirror' in which things are neither existing, nor non-existing, things appear yet one cannot say if they are within, or outside the mirror.

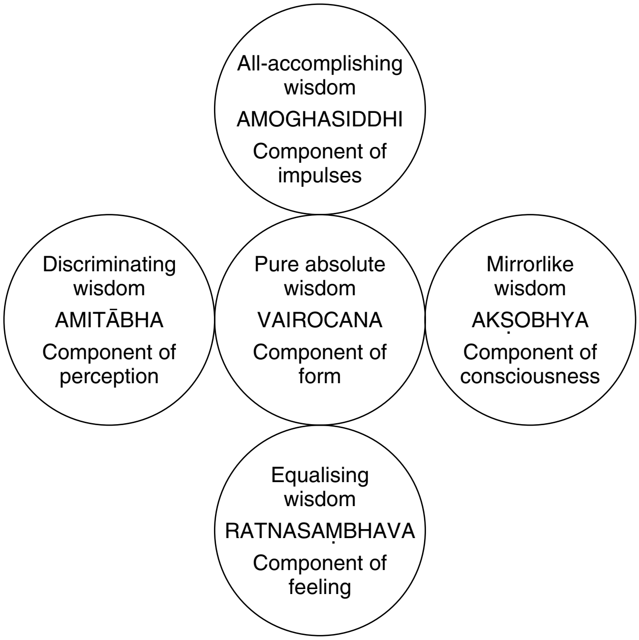


Figure 4.1 The cosmic Buddha *maṇḍala*.

Source: (Klostermaier, 1999:193).[a]

Note

a It should be noted that different Tantric systems give different correspondence, to elements, partly because a different Buddha is seen as the central one.

The function of this *Dhyāni* Buddha in terms of spiritual purification is the transforming of self-centred feeling into a compassion for all living beings through the wisdom of equality as embodied in Ratnasaṃbhava (Govinda, 1969:109). There appears, then, to be no detailed correlation between the highly complex *maṇḍala* of the cosmic Buddhas and the *Dhammakāya* model of the spheres and elements located at the centre of the body as mooted by Bowers (1995:33–5).

In the *Dhammakāya* meditation there are five levels of *Dhammakāya* to be achieved. As we have seen they are 'Russian-doll' like arrangements; the more refined image (although larger) emerges from within the previous (less refined) image as the meditator advances in concentration and insight. As we have seen, the more fetters the meditator has broken, the more refined and larger the visualised Buddha image will be. Bowers is right to point out that there are similarities here with the tantric idea of the 'Five Sheathes'. Drawing on Lama Anagarika Govinda as his source, Bowers (1996:37) describes these and points out that the fifth, or innermost sheath

> Is the body of the highest, universal consciousness, nourished and sustained by exalted joy. It is only experienced in a state of enlightenment, or in the highest states of meditation. It corresponds in the terminology of the Mahāyāna to the 'Body of Bliss': the *Saṃbhogakāya.*
>
> (Govinda, 1969:148)[25]

Clearly the experiencing of *Saṃbhogakāya* through accessing the innermost sheath has some similarities to the experience of *Dhammakāya*, as inner bodies are accessed in the Dhammakāya tradition.

One of the distinctive features of *Dhammakāya* meditation is the use made of psycho-physical centres. Bowers (1996:39–43) compares this with Tibetan Tantric practice, although at no point does he exclude other Buddhist Tantric approaches. These psycho-physical *cakras* are 'centres' in the body where consciousness is centred. These points or centres of force 'collect, transform and distribute the forces flowing through them . . . From them radiate secondary streams of psychic force . . . by activating or awakening the activities of the various centres, we spiritualise and transform our body' (Govinda, 1969:135). The five *cakras* (related to the brain, throat, heart, navel and root) are divided up into three different sections in Tibetan practice. The brain and throat centres belong to the 'cosmic' zone, which is linked by the heart centre ('human' zone) to the 'terrestrial' zone in which the navel and root centres exist. This latter zone is the plane of corporeality (having body) and earth-bound forms of nature. These five psycho-physical centres are five different units which represent man, and are reflected in the shape of a *stūpa*. There is a detailed relationship between the *cakras* and the cosmic Buddhas. For example, the heart centre is represented by a triangle (see Figure 4.2); this is thought to contain the sacred flame which purifies and then integrates the various aspects of our personality The cosmic Buddha Akṣobhya (seen in some tantric systems as Vajrasattva) is associated with this *cakra*. This detailed symbolism and complex practice underpinned by an elegant philosophy associated with the *cakras* in the Tibetan tradition, is absent from *Dhammakāya* meditation. As we have seen from the earlier description of *Dhammakāya* meditation, the body centres are used to facilitate the visualisation of the crystal sphere two finger breadths above the navel. This is understood to be the resting place of the mind and where all meditative attention is focused. The other body centres only function as reference points to help the visualisation process. Indeed, the experienced meditator would go straight to the ultimate resting place, without giving attention to the body centres.

It is just within the realms of possibility that Luang Phaw Sot met someone with experience of the Tibetan approach to meditation in Bangkok around 1910 to 1915, the time he began to practise what is now known as *Dhammakāya* meditation. There is, however, no evidence to support the theory submitted by Bowers that Luang Phaw Sot borrowed ideas from Tibetan Buddhist meditation for his own approach.

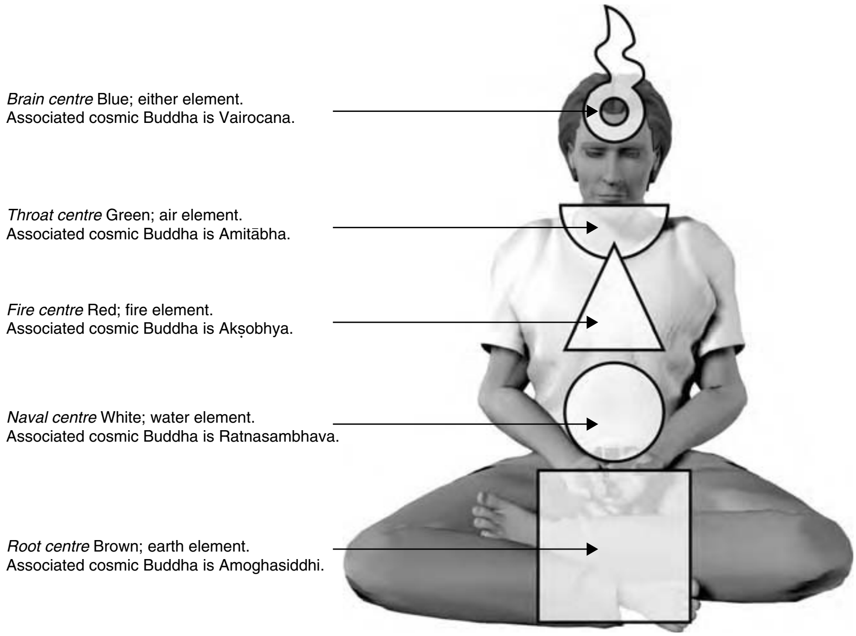


Figure 4.2 Parts of the human body, represented by the elements in the *stūpa*.

Source: Adapted from Steve Clarke & Mel Thompson, *Buddhism, A New Approach* (Hodder & Stonghton Educational, 1996). Information adopted from Govinda (1969:184).

The Yogāvacara tradition as a possible source of the **Dhammakāya** *meditation technique*

According to Crosby, Yogāvacara means ‘practitioner of spiritual discipline (i.e. meditation), this term recurs in the texts examined by Bizot with reference to the person undertaking the practices advocated therein’ (Crosby, 2000:141). ‘Tantric Theravāda’ (Bechert) and ‘Esoteric Southern Buddhism’ (Cousins) are alternative terms for Yogāvacara.

Crosby (2000:178–9) mentions three theories as to the possible development of the Yogāvacara tradition in Thailand. First, it may have been the case that the Yogāvacara tradition came to Thailand through the Mon (Southern Burmese) expression of Buddhism. Second, there is the idea that Hinduism influenced Theravāda practice (particularly through Brahmanic Tantric practices associated with the kings of Siam and Cambodia). Third, Yogāvacara emerged due to the cross-fertilisation between the Mahāyāna and Theravāda traditions, as Mahāyāna Buddhism was already in the region before Theravāda became the established school. One other possibility, not mentioned by Crosby, may be the influence of

ethnic Thai and Chinese bringing forms of Chinese Buddhist practice with them as they migrated from South China to Siam.

The Thammayut movement, in its desire to standardise Thai Buddhism and eradicate superstitious practice, may well have sought to eliminate a variety of meditative techniques and practices that were deemed to be unacceptable.[26] This would have been especially true in Bangkok and the areas in the provinces where the Thammayut influence was particularly strong. Monks and laity away from the Thammayut influence, however, continued to practise as they pleased, and meditative techniques, magical practices and esoteric teachings were passed down by word of mouth. As a young monk, Prince Mongkut believed the Mon tradition to be the one most in keeping with the original teachings of the Buddha and he was re-ordained by Mon monks. It would thus be ironic if this tradition was the carrier of ideas that the Thammayut fraternity sought to discredit in their bid to standardise Thai Buddhism!

Crosby very helpfully identifies eleven distinctive features of Yogāvacara practice. Although she does not relate *Dhammakāya* meditation to these, I suggest some congruence between the following features from her list and *Dhammakāya* meditation:

- 'The creation of a Buddha within through the performance of ritual by placing and recognizing within one's body the qualities of the Buddha, which in turn become the Buddha' (Crosby, 2000:141). In *Dhammakāya* meditation there is the identification of a Buddha at the centre of the body which arises through meditation. As already described there are five *Dhammakāya* bodies or Buddhas. These vary in width and correspond to the stages of enlightenment from achieving Stream entry to becoming an *Arahat*;
- Replacing of the original object of meditation by another object, which is then treated as the original (Crosby, 2000:141), (it may be argued that this technique is not exclusive to the Yogāvacara tradition). In the *Dhammakāya* tradition there is an initial focus on a crystal sphere at the centre of the body. As the meditator advances in skill and purity, five more refined spheres are visualised. In turn, these are replaced by a sequence of eight inner-bodies. Ultimately the five *Dhammakāya* states may be achieved. The precise state is verified by the height and lap-width of the visualised Buddha images;
- Esoteric interpretations of words, objects and myths that otherwise have a standard exoteric meaning or purpose in Theravāda Buddhism (Crosby, 2000:142). A clear example of this is *nibbāna*. This is normally viewed as not-self (*anattā*) in traditional Theravāda terms. In the *Dhammakāya* tradition, however, *nibbāna* is taught as being *atta* and a place to which someone with a high state of enlightenment may visit on a temporary basis through the power of *Dhammakāya* meditation. A sense of intrigue and interest in *nibbāna* is created by the practice of Phra Dhammachayo allegedly travelling to *āyatananibbāna* through the power of meditation to make offerings to the Buddhas on the first Sunday of each month. The concretising and

commodifying of *nibbāna* by the movement has already been discussed. Reference has been made in Chapter 2 to an afternoon chanting session led by Phra Dhammachayo in which *ñāṇa* (inner-knowledge) was used as an addition to the Triple Gem. This 'addition' is apparently common practice at Wat Phra Dhammakāya. It does not, however, occur at traditional Thai temples. The effect of using *ñāṇa* (inner-knowledge) as an addition to the Triple Gem is to create an impression that Wat Phra Dhammakāya practice may be more advanced than that of mainstream Thai Buddhism;

- The focus of practice is to achieve both soteriological and worldly ends, such as healing, longevity and protection (Crosby, 2000:142). As well as progression on the path to enlightenment, Wat Phra Dhammakāya members seek prosperity and the healing of self and others;
- Expertise in the Yogāvacara tradition is not restricted to monks (Crosby, 2000:142). At Wat Phra Dhammakāya, the contribution made by nuns and lay people is recognised, indeed the key figure, as we have seen, in the formation of Wat Phra Dhammakāya was a nun.

The main distinctive on Crosby's list which is not present in Dhammakāya practice is the importance of *Abhidhamma* categories and the books of the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*. Traditionally, however, it is the *Sutta Piṭaka* which is emphasised in the Thai Theravāda tradition.

A monk at Wat Paknam informed me that Luang Phaw Sot was not the first to use a crystal sphere in meditation; this was something the Dhammakāya leader would have learned from a meditation teacher.[27] The significance of Luang Phaw Sot's achievement was his ability to reach a much deeper and purer level than others who used the crystal sphere visualisation technique. The *Dhammakāya* method initially appears to be a *samatha* approach as there is the intense focus of the mind on a selected object, and then an inner image (*nimitta*) of this, in this case a bright and pure light in the form of a crystal sphere, located within the body, two finger widths above the navel. The model of meditation does, however, go on to include *vipassanā* elements as that which arises is contemplated and sought to be understood.

Crosby (2000:187) states that the 'meditation system used by the Dhammakāya (Thammakai) Foundation is derived from the Yogāvacara tradition'. This statement is made in the context of a review of Phra Mettānando's doctoral thesis, and no supporting evidence is produced.[28] In the introduction to his thesis Phra Mettānando indicates that his hypothesis is 'that there must have been a predecessor of the school of [the] Thammakai method of meditation, left unrecognized by the modern Theravāda tradition in Thailand' (Mettānando Bhikkhu, 1991:2). He goes on to say that he discovered in the book he was using as a primary source for his research 'instructions, diagrams and descriptions for higher meditation practices, some were very familiar to those taught by Phra Mongkon-thep-munī [Luang Phaw Sot]' (Mettānando Bhikkhu, 1999:2).[29] Surprisingly, Phra

Mettānando does not specify which practices he is referring to, neither does he cite any other evidence which would support his hypothesis. The only reference he makes to the Dhammakāya tradition is on page 59 of the thesis, footnote 343. Here, Phra Mettānando discusses a section of Phra Mahā Cai Yasōtharat's book concerning the maximising of the amount of merit gained from an offering ceremony.[30] Phra Mettānando points out that the belief 'that there is a single location within the physical body that maximizes the amount of merit is also intriguing. The similar idea is strongly held in the modern Thammakai school, but there the centre of power is listed as the *Centre of the Body*' (Mettānando, 1999:59). Phra Mettānando, however, stops short of suggesting that *Dhammakāya* meditation was influenced by the meditative practice taught by Supreme Patriarch Kai Thuean which Crosby (2000:187) suggests is in the Yogāvacara tradition.

My identification of five commonalities between *Dhammakāya* meditation and Crosby's list of distinctives of the Yogāvacara tradition serve to support her position that *Dhammakāya* meditation is 'a somewhat adapted, form of the Yogāvacara tradition' (Crosby, 2000:187). Some Dhammakāya borrowing from the Yogāvacara tradition appears probable; however, there is not yet sufficient evidence to prove that *Dhammakāya* meditation is 'derived from the Yogāvacara tradition' (Crosby, 2000:186).

Conclusion

Dhammakāya meditation is within the bounds of acceptability of Thai Buddhism. It is taught and practised at Wat Phra Dhammakāya, Wat Paknam and Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhamakāyaram, as well as in other smaller temples. Many who criticise *Dhammakāya* meditation do so because they disapprove of the high-profile nature of Wat Phra Dhammakāya, its teaching and approach to fund raising. Were it not for these issues *Dhammakāya* meditation would be more widely acceptable. Wat Paknam and Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāyaram also have similar perspectives on *nibbāna* as Wat Phra Dhammakāya, but because of their much lower profile they do not come in for criticism. Some[31] relate the story of how towards the end of his life Luang Phaw Sot approached officials at Wat Mahāthat with the request that a senior monk visit Wat Paknam and assess his meditative abilities.[32] Luang Phaw Sot allegedly confessed that he had been wrong to emphasise *Dhammakāya* meditation as he had come to realise that *Vipassanā* was the best method of meditation. By that time Luang Phaw Sot had a large following of *Dhammakāya* meditators at Wat Paknam and was understandably reluctant to inform them that he had been mistaken. As one would expect, *Dhammakāya* meditators reject this story.

It is possible, though unlikely, that someone who had contact with a Tibetan model of meditation may have met Luang Phaw Sot around 1910–15. The similarity between *Dhammakāya* meditation and Tibetan approaches, in terms of the *paṭhama-magga* and the cosmic *maṇḍala* has already been mentioned. It is interesting, however, to note that the four outer spheres (water, earth, fire and wind) have been

discontinued in meditative practice at Wat Phra Dhammakāya. Their use is considered cumbersome and unnecessary to the practice of *Dhammakāya* meditation.

Similarities also exist between the concepts of the crystal sphere and the *Vajra* (diamond or thunderbolt). They both represent the highest spiritual state and function as focal points of meditation. There is commonality between the *Russian-doll* arrangements of the increasingly refined images which arise and the Five-Sheathes, the innermost corresponding to the most refined body visualised by the *Dhammakāya* meditator. The use of psycho-physical centres of the body (*cakras*) in *Dhammakāya* and Tibetan approaches to meditation appear to be another commonality. Yet the Yogāvacara tradition, or esoteric practices within the Theravāda tradition also make extensive use of *cakras*.[33] This is a closer tradition to *Dhammakāya* meditation than Tibetan Buddhism and thus a more likely influence. We have seen, however, that Wat Phra Dhammakāya no longer insist on the process of using or imagining a crystal sphere at the various *cakras* before bringing it to rest at the seventh base of the mind, a position in the centre of the body two finger-breadths above the navel. While these commonalties may be demonstrated, the cross-fertilisation theory between *Dhammakāya* meditation and Tibetan Buddhism suggested by Bowers has not been proved.

The *Dhammakāya* is seen as the *Tathāgata*, which is one of the titles of the Buddha. Indeed, the *Dhammakāya* is viewed as a kind of buddha-nature which resides within each person and when a person achieves *Dhammakāya Arahatta*, he has become an enlightened being, the possessor of the Unconditioned.

Yogāvacara ideas rather than Tibetan influences shaping Luang Phaw Sot's approach to meditation are much more likely. Yogāvacara practices in the north-east region may have continued throughout the reforming processes carried out by the Thammayut fraternity, and passed on to Luang Phaw Sot, possibly through a monastic or lay meditator visiting the capital. I have identified five commonalities between Crosby's list of distinctives of the Yogāvacara tradition and *Dhammakāya* meditation. Some Dhammakāya borrowing from the Yogāvacara tradition appears probable. There is, however, not yet sufficient evidence to prove that *Dhammakāya* meditation is 'derived from the Yogāvacara tradition' (Crosby, 2000:186).

It is quite possible that Luang Phaw Sot developed his approach to meditation as a result of his psychic experiences and refined it through practice. Wat Phra Dhammakāya members believe that their founder rediscovered the spiritual nature of the *Dhamma*-body which exists inside everyone, and the meditative technique practised by the Buddha and his followers which subsequently fell into disuse.

Dhammakāya meditation is claimed by Wat Phra Dhammakāya members to be very helpful in the purifying of thoughts and intentions. It is alleged that it increases the ability of the meditator to achieve goals and gain insight into the true nature of things. As progress is made in *Dhammakāya* meditation, it is alleged that some meditators develop a variety of psychic and healing powers. These claims may also be made by those from other traditions of meditation. We have seen from previous chapters that higher *Dhammakāya* meditation was

practised around the clock at Wat Paknam and temple members draw on a number of stories to verify the efficacy of that practice. While some skilled meditators still seek to heal people through meditation, higher meditation does not appear to have been part of Wat Phra Dhammakāya's programme. The construction of *Akan Hoksip* ('sixtieth Building'), which is being built for the practice of Dhammakāya meditation, including higher meditation, heralds a return to lost practice.[34] It may also serve as the opening of a new phase of the movement's development.

5

THE HISTORY OF THE SANTI ASOKE MOVEMENT AND A DESCRIPTION OF ITS VARIOUS COMMUNITIES

Rak Rakphong and the founding of the Santi Asoke movement[1]

The founder of Santi Asoke, Rak Rakphong, was born in 1934 in Srisaket, a province in North-East Thailand. He was named Mongkol by his Chinese father and Thai mother. His mother died when he was a teenager and he worked hard supporting his six brothers and sisters. During his studies at Poh Chang College of Arts and Crafts, he changed his name from Mongkol to Rak.[2] After graduation from college in 1958, Rak began working with a Bangkok TV station, in time becoming well known as a song composer and TV programmer.

Rak's spiritual search took him to 'black magic', faith healing, hypnotism and mediumship before focusing on the teachings of the Buddha (*Bangkok Post,* 22.7.88).

> He shocked his family and friends by shaving his head, wearing only simple white clothes and going round barefoot. By the time he finally decided to resign from his job, he had been a strict vegetarian for a number of years.
>
> (Poompanna, 1989:12)

In his autobiography the Asoke leader describes an insight experience he had which convinced him he was an *ariya*, or worthy disciple of the Buddha.

> At two o'clock in the morning of Tuesday January 1970 I woke up and walked from my bedroom into the bathroom to relieve myself. Suddenly a brilliant flash occurred within me – a brightness, openness, and detachment which could not be explained in human terms. I knew only that my life opened before me and that the whole world seemed to be revealed. I knew at that moment that I had no more doubts.
>
> (Swearer, 1991:180)

In November 1970, aged 36, Rak was ordained as a monk by Phra Ratchaworakhun, abbot of Wat Asokaram, a Thammayut monastery in Samut Prakaan, some 20 kilometres from Bangkok. One probable reason for the choice of monastery was its association with the ascetic practices of the Thai forest

tradition. On his ordination Rak was given the Pāli monastic name of Bodhiraksa, Bodhirak in Thai.[3]

It would appear that Bodhirak was not only strict in his practice of Buddhism but he was intolerant of those who he considered to be lax in their spiritual practice. He began to preach sermons to the laity denouncing his fellow monks for superstitious practices, smoking and eating meat (although this is not forbidden in the *vinaya*) and being lazy. In his preaching he taught that, if his fellow monks 'were not able to give up crude *kilesa* (moral blemishes) such as these, they would not be able to give up subtle *kilesa* and so progress towards *nibbāna*' (Jackson, 1989:161). Bodhirak's call to disciplined living struck a chord with a number of lay people but understandably drew fire from his fellow monks who regarded him as being divisive. Bodhirak justified his critical remarks by maintaining that his state of insight gave him the ability to discern the spiritual behaviour of another, and placed on him the responsibility to correct (what he considered to be) substandard behaviour and teaching.

Bodhirak is recorded as saying 'I am frank. And loud. I am not a nanny. My job is not to cradle the baby gently' (*Bangkok Post,* 22.7.88). On another occasion he justified his forthright approach as follows:

> There is a misconception that the Buddha only said nice things that fell easily on the ears. Once, after one of his sermons, 60 monks died suddenly because of the hard-hitting teachings, 60 resigned, and the other 60 attained enlightenment. No one has died or resigned because of my teaching yet.
>
> (*Bangkok Post*, 22.7.88)

Bodhirak's lively and controversial teaching drew a following of both Thammayut and Mahānikai monks and lay people. He referred to his followers as the 'Asoke group', and they met outside Nakhorn Pathom, some 50 kilometres west of Bangkok. Bodhirak's 'Thammayut preceptor strongly objected to Bodhirak's project and demanded that he resign his Thammayut membership by turning in his official monastic identification card' (Swearer, 1991:670). The preceptor's objection was based on the fact that there were Mahānikai monks in Bodhirak's group. In 1973 Bodhirak handed back his monk's registration card to the abbot of Wat Asokaram and was re-ordained at a Mahānikai monastery at Nakhorn Pathom. Bodhirak continued to develop his own religious centre, known as Daen Asoke, situated at Kampansaen, some 40 kilometres from the provincial town of Nakhorn Pathom. There he and his followers practised what they considered to be the basic teachings of the Buddha, free from sectarian division and state control. He initially refused to register his centre as required by the Department of Religious Affairs, justifying his action as follows:

> I do not need to be affiliated with either the Thammayut or Mahānikai because I was ordained into Buddhism. I do not wish to be either

> Mahānikai or Thammayut because in the time of the Buddha there was no *nikai.*
>
> (Jackson, 1989:161)

Dr Tavivat Puntiarigvivat is of the opinion that Bodhirak's background was such that he had no family affiliations to either Mahānikai or Thammayut, but that he also had a poor grasp of Theravāda Buddhism.[4]

Initial separation from the *Saṅgha* and growth of the Santi Asoke movement

Bodhirak eventually registered Daen Asoke as a monastery, as the provincial *Saṅgha* governor threatened to inform the police that he was contravening *The 1962 Saṅgha Act* (Jackson, 1989:161).[5] In 1975, the *Saṅgha* governor of Nakhon Pathom province pressurised the abbot of Nong Kratum temple (who was well respected by the Asoke and local communities), to force Asoke monastics to wear the normal saffron robes, rather than the brown robes they had adopted.[6] According to Swearer (1991:670), Asoke was also instructed to dismantle their accommodation[7] at Daen Asoke.[8] The abbot of Nong Kratum temple was reprimanded by the provincial *Saṅgha* governor for not dealing effectively with Santi Asoke, and when the abbot subsequently fell ill, this was viewed by the local community as being the indirect fault of Asoke. Bodhirak's response was to require the *Mahā thera samakom* to deal directly with him, rather than pressurising the abbot of Wat Nong Kratum (Feungfusakul, 1993:91). Bodhirak thus declared himself completely independent from the Mahānikai and Thammayut groupings, and the enforcing mechanism of state-regulated Thai Buddhism.

The *Mahā thera samakom* were unable to respond effectively to Bodhirak's unprecedented action. This slow and weak response to the Asoke community gave the movement time to grow and develop.[9] The community in Nakhon Pathom province attracted the support of a number of lower middle and working-class people who felt that the state regulated *Saṅgha* favoured the establishment, who continued to marginalise them. Bodhirak's background prior to becoming a monk (Chinese father, poor circumstances and hard work until finally becoming well known and prosperous) was also attractive to this section of Thai society, as many of them had struggled to educate themselves and rise out of poor circumstances. Bodhirak's criticisms of 'superstitious' practice and his rationalistic approach to Buddhism certainly sat comfortably with this education-valuing group who favoured an approach to their religion based on rigorous self-effort, and rationalism.[10]

In 1976, three Asoke centres were established (Swearer, 1991:670).[11] These were: Santi Asoke in the then outskirts of Bangkok, Sri Saket in North-East Thailand and Sali Asoke in Phai Sali, Central Thailand. Feungfusakul (1993:92) mentions the mobile nature of the Asoke communities. Rather than depending on people coming to their centres, or focusing on the homes of members, they move out to where the people are. As they travel around, the Asoke monastics and lay people walk barefoot, eating

only one vegetarian meal per day, and sleeping in the evenings in a *klot*.[12] Thus, the Asoke interpretation of the *Dhamma* is taught from place to place. Indeed, the Asoke term for this peripatetic activity is *charik*, meaning 'to roam'.[13] This 'roaming' was distinct from the forest monks' approach which usually involved individual monks going to remote parts to practise meditation in solitude. The Asoke approach included both monastic and laity, involved a considerable number of people and focused on the urban rather than the rural.[14] As a result, a large number of people were presented with the Asoke message. Some, particularly those who felt themselves to be suffering, or not receiving the justice they deserved, aligned themselves to the group.

The *charik* facilitates the spiritual development of those who participate. The practice involves a high level of self-discipline, and mindfulness in all activity undertaken, particularly walking barefoot. Not only does this lead to a building up of strength and self-discipline but it also improves concentration eventually, it is said, leading to enlightenment.[15] As participants listen to sermons from the monks, and talk to people about Asoke belief and practice, and how these beliefs have led to a great reduction in suffering for them personally, they are strengthened in their beliefs and practice.

In 1977, the Dhammasanti Foundation was founded. This branch of the Asoke movement deals with the production and distribution of literature, varying from monthly news letters to doctrinal books written by Bodhirak.

In November 1979, the *Mahā thera samakom* met to consider Bodhirak and his growing group of followers. They sought to challenge Bodhirak's credibility and described the movement as being subversive, levelling the following charges against the Asoke community:

- Many of the monks had been being incorrectly ordained. According to Thai monastic law, the preceptor who sponsors an ordination must have been a monk for at least ten years. Some monks at Bodhirak's centre were officially ordained elsewhere but others were ordained by Bodhirak who had not been ordained for the required length of time;
- Bodhirak's monks wrongly criticised other Buddhist monks for being lax in their practice;
- Bodhirak's monks disseminated propaganda which promoted a misunderstanding of the *vinaya*;
- Bodhirak's monks advertised themselves as being disaffiliated from the Thai *Saṅgha.*

(Jackson, 1989:169)

Bodhirak was therefore accused of threatening the well-being of Buddhism and the security of the nation. Consequently the *Mahā thera samakom* instructed all abbots in Thailand to keep a careful watch on the activities of Santi Asoke.

Perhaps Santi Asoke's most vocal critic is Phra Anan Senakhan (Chayananto). In 1982, while ordained as a monk, Anan published a book heavily criticising

Bodhirak for not conforming to traditional practice and for disassociating himself from the *Saṅgha*.[16] In fact, Anan is also critical of monks who are *superstitious* and/or lax in their practice, stating that such practice only strengthens Bodhirak's case.[17] Anan and Bodhirak are both critical of what they consider to be substandard practice within the *Saṅgha*; Anan, however, wishes to purify from the inside, while Bodhirak pursues a 'back to basics' approach, in open confrontation with the *Saṅgha*.

Certainly Anan, a police officer prior to his ordination into Thammayut monastic orders, was pro-Thai bureaucracy and wants to see the state protection and favour of the *Saṅgha* continue. In return, the *Saṅgha* should continue to legitimise the government so that Buddhism prospers because of central control. Bodhirak did not come from a family with government connections. His working-class Chinese background means he is marginalised by Thai bureaucracy.

Anan and an associate made an official complaint at the beginning of 1982 to the Commander of the Suppression Division of Bangkok police (Jackson, 1989:173). The result was that the *Mahā thera samakom* 'eventually wrote to the police advising that they should find more facts and conduct more investigations before proceeding further with the case' (Jackson, 1989:174). Phra Anan[18] responded by saying that the statement should have been released a long time ago but said that the secretariat had been more concerned with the *Rattana Kosin* bicentennial celebrations recently (*Bangkok Post,* 1.7.82).[19]

A number of dynamics come into play here, but two brief comments are relevant. First, Bodhirak keeps the *vinaya* and according to the *vinaya* he had taken no action (not even the returning of his ordination certificate to his preceptor) to suggest that he is not a monk. However, in terms of *The Saṅgha Act of 1962*, Bodhirak could be accused of substandard practice with regard to a number of issues.[20] Clearly, the difference between the *vinaya* and the state imposed *Saṅgha* acts is a very difficult issue to resolve for the *Mahā thera samakom* and to a lesser extent, the Department of Religious Affairs. Second, the emergence of the middle class and their increasing ability to articulate their political and social views lessens the establishment's ability to act as it might wish. Indeed, it has to be said that there are those within the new elite who are anti-establishment.

Santi Asoke, Chamlong Srimuang and Thai politics in the 1980s

During the 1988 General Elections, the spotlight shone once again on Santi Asoke due to the campaign of Major General Chamlong Srimuang to become governor of Bangkok. Chamlong, born in 1935 into a lower-middle-class family, had been a high-profile figure in Thai politics since his appointment in 1980 as Secretary General to Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanond.

Known as *mahā* for living a frugal, highly religious life, and eating only one vegetarian meal a day, the *Bangkok Post* (3.8.81) points out Chamlong's commitment to his work, leaving home at 6.30 am and returning at 10 pm[21]

When asked why so many senior monks had so many worldly possessions, he replied 'I now have so many enemies, don't let me have more among senior monks.' Chamlong travelled around the country giving talks or sermons to various groups of people. On these occasions he would sleep outside under a *klot* just like a wandering forest monk. Of course, Chamlong travelled beyond the confines of Thailand. When he did he attracted attention due to his ascetic lifestyle, as the following quote indicates:

> The star of General Prem Tisulanonda's trip to Australia last week was apparently not the prime minister himself but his 46 year old Secretary General Col Chamlong Srimuang. The *Melbourne Age* pointed up the colonel's practice of eating one vegetarian meal each day, practising celibacy along with his wife and his crackdown on bars and night-clubs which made him unpopular with tourists.
>
> (*Bangkok Post,* 12.7.86)

It was in 1981 that Chamlong had launched his first political campaign. His leadership and rhetoric skills focused on the defeating of a proposed abortion bill. With the backing of a group of Santi Asoke supporters, Chamlong organised a series of pro-life, nationwide meetings. Despite drawing cross-party support, and engaging in successful rally-style politics (which was later to become a hallmark of his political style), he was unable to stop the bill becoming law (McCargo, 1993:84). Indeed, the first reading in the House of Representatives resulted in a 79 to 3 vote to legalise abortion, with many politicians abstaining. This resulted in Chamlong resigning his position as secretary general in disgust (*Bangkok Post,* 21.10.81). Chamlong's position is that according to Buddhism, life begins when an ovum mixes with sperm. Abortion then breaks the First Precept (the taking of life). It also contradicts the Second Precept which forbids theft because abortion 'is tantamount to stealing the life of a baby' (*Bangkok Post,* 25.5.88).

Chamlong and his wife Sirilak were both active in the Santi Asoke movement. In 1981, Chamlong set up the 'Dhamma Army Foundation'. The name of this charitable trust 'suggested an early Chamlongian vision of Santi Asoke, as a military force engaged in a form of moral Buddhist warfare' (McCargo, 1993:85). Some 3 years later, Chamlong established the 'Dhamma Practitioners' Association'.[22] Chamlong was promoted from colonel to major general in October 1985 but resigned two days later in order to take part in civil elections for governor of Bangkok. A good number of Santi Asoke practitioners formed the core of Chamlong's support group[23] which helped him reach an overwhelming victory in his quest to become Bangkok's governor in 1985.[24] Chamlong was the first ever independent candidate to be elected governor of the capital (*Bangkok Post,* 15.11.85) and the first elected governor in a decade of Interior Ministry appointments (*Asia Magazine* 11.1.87). Of course, there were others outside the Santi Asoke network who helped Chamlong to victory, principally a number of loyal military associates. In spite of the obvious close relationship between

Chamlong and his Santi Asoke supporters, an appearance of detachment between the two was maintained in public (McCargo, 1993:87).

In 1988 Chamlong set up the Phalang Dhamma political party. [25] The party was able to meet the Interior Ministry's criterion of 5,000 members spread widely throughout the country before it could be registered. This was made possible through the nationwide Asoke network. Indeed, 10,310 names were submitted as members of Phalang Dhamma (McCargo, 1993:89). The new party decided to contest more seats than any other party for the elections of 24 July, and most of the party's executive committee and around half of the candidates who contested for seats outside Bangkok were known followers of Santi Asoke.[26] Bodhirak's approach was to encourage his lay followers to be politically engaged and indeed viewed such activity as *Dhamma* activity or practice. Santi Asoke members may well have been advised to vote for the Phalang Dhamma Party and certainly would not be expected to support a candidate whose moral views were in conflict with the Santi Asoke movement. Bodhirak publicly expressed his support for Chamlong before the elections, but apparently predicted that the party would not do well. It should be pointed out that many of the candidates were rejects from mainstream parties. The party was extremely disappointed as only 14 out of its 295 candidates were elected to parliament. Only one candidate was a Santi Asoke practitioner. Chamlong was disheartened with the result because of heavy vote buying and a low turnout of voters in the capital (*Bangkok Post,* 28.7.88).

At the time of the 1988 elections, many opponents of the Santi Asoke movement felt that Chamlong's position as governor of Bangkok and his membership of Santi Asoke gave a certain protection to the Asoke movement. Chamlong enjoyed a good relationship with General Prem, the then prime minister. General Prem was trying to 'clean up' national politics, Chamlong was attempting to do the same in the metropolis, and Bodhirak had introduced rigorous standards into the way Asoke practised Buddhism. Yet Chamlong's association with Santi Asoke at this time was not entirely positive. Aspersions were cast on Santi Asoke for having a political agenda. Bodhirak had gone on record during the run-up to the elections as saying 'religion and politics are one and the same' and clearly many senior monks were alarmed by this mix of religion and politics.

The ascetic practice and frequent references to Buddhist teaching was perceived as evidence of Chamlong's moral goodness (*kwam dī*). Chamlong was viewed as a politician with moral stature and charisma (*pāramī*), which had a particular drawing power. Politicians and army generals often seek out ascetic monks who have a good reputation and ask for a blessing (usually a fairly public ceremony). This 'stamp of approval' by the monastic evidenced in his blessing of the leader gives a measure of credibility to the leader. McCargo (1993:43) points out that Chamlong 'unifies the secular and the sacred in a single personage, [and] already possesses the kind of spiritual "credibility" which many other prominent figures in Thailand so conspicuously lack'.

Chamlong was very popular as governor, having a reputation as an anti-corruption, simple living, wise leader.[27] Whilst governor of Bangkok, Chamlong

spent his entire entertainment budget on providing breakfasts for the capital's street sweepers. This was served by Chamlong and his top aides. Indeed, Chamlong who normally rises at 3 am has been known to join the street sweepers in their early morning cleaning (McCargo, 1993:54). The thesis Chamlong completed for his MSc degree was on labour unrest in Thailand. His understanding of working-class mentality brought about by his studies and upbringing meant he related well to manual workers. That said many street sellers allegedly expressed their disappointment with Chamlong as he moved them off Bangkok streets in his attempts to clean up the city (McCargo, 1993:61).

Of course, not everyone found Chamlong's style of governance attractive!

> Some critics see him as a Thai Buddhist version of the Ayatollah Komeini. Others say that he is an uncompromising man who cannot take criticism lightly, that he will become a dictator if he attains power, that all that he has done for the last two years is sweep the streets of Bangkok.
>
> (*Bangkok Post,* 2.11.88).

Clearly, Chamlong's agenda was driven by his ascetic nature, desire for cleanliness and belief that greed should be curbed (all Santi Asoke distinctives). His goal to reduce the national debt and focus on moral rather than economic development meant he did not invest in urgently needed public programmes such as better waste-disposal systems and public health. Of course, setting up systems gave businessmen the opportunity to engage in corrupt activities, something Chamlong was particularly keen to stamp out.

Another attack on the Asoke movement came as a result of the criticisms of Samak Sundaravej, leader of the Prachakorn Thai Party. Working closely with the conservative Buddhist movement Parian Dhamma Samaakhom, the Prachakorn Thai Party distributed 5,000 eight-page booklets in central Bangkok, criticising Santi Asoke and their involvement with Phalang Dhamma. A Parian Dhamma Samaakhom banner displayed on a truck read 'Choose Phalang Santi Asoke to be MP's and get a sexually abnormal person for prime minister and Bodhirak Bhikkhu as head of a new Buddhist order' (McCargo, 1993:91).[28]

The assistant abbot of Wat Bovornnivet, Phra Sophon Ganabhorn, declared that 'Santi Asoke could be a threat to the stability of Buddhism within Thailand' (McCargo, 1993:92).[29] The idea here is that if Chamlong became Prime Minister, and/or if Phalang Dhamma obtained a strong presence in parliament, Santi Asoke could become a legitimate fraternity like Mahānikai and Thammayut, and this could lead to a detrimental change of the status quo in state-regulated Buddhism. Immediately after polling was completed on 24 June 1988, Phra Dhammapiṭaka (Prayudh Payutto) released an unbound booklet entitled *Karani Santi Asoke*.[30] The booklet criticised the support Santi Asoke offered the Phalang Dhamma Party, and while it did not influence the outcome of the election, it was calling for a serious examination of Santi Asoke's approach to political involvement.

Ecclesiastic and civil court proceedings against the Santi Asoke movement

After considerable discussions between the *Mahā thera samakom* Department of Religious Affairs, Ministry of Education and the National Security Council, Bodhirak was approached in September 1988 with the following five point proposal:

- Asoke has to come back under the control of the *Mahā thera samakom*;
- Asoke has to be legally registered with the Department of Religious Affairs. This would require the approval of the *Mahā thera samakom*;[31]
- Asoke has to stop criticising the *Mahā thera samakom*;
- Asoke has to discontinue its activities;
- The authorities will not take any measures against Asoke.

(adapted from Feungfusakul, 1993:183)

Santi Asoke rejected this five point proposal. On 23 May 1989 an assembly of 150 senior monks meeting at the Buddha Monton Centre on the outskirts of Bangkok, unanimously agreed to ask the Ecclesiastical Council to defrock Phra Bodhirak for allegedly defying and distorting the *Saṅgha's* discipline. The Supreme Patriarch and chair of the meeting, Somdet Phra Yana Sangvorn lauded the senior monks' decision, saying the move would be a 'blessing to Buddhism'. Describing Santi Asoke's refusal to come under the Ecclesiastical Council as 'a thorny issue subverting the religion and the *Saṅgha*,' the Supreme Patriarch went on to compare the Asoke issues to the controversies which arose in the *Saṅgha* after the *parinibbāna* of the Buddha when some monks challenged the Buddha's teachings. The chairman of the Ecclesiastical Council, Phra Thera Yana Munee of Wat Pathum Kongka, informed the gathering that Bodhirak's denunciation of the Ecclesiastical Council posed a major threat to Buddhism (*Bangkok Post,* 24.6.89).

In response, Bodhirak pointed out that the Ecclesiastical Council's 'action was severe and provocative, but that he and his group would show mercy towards the council because it does not know what it is doing'. The Asoke leader commented that monks who pass judgement should be monks who do not break the monastic code of conduct imposed by the Buddha and questioned how many of the monks who passed judgement on him practice all the precepts (*Bangkok Post,* 31.5.89). Bodhirak went on to apply that piece of polemic by adding 'according to Buddhist law, monks with sins cannot judge other monks'. Sunai Sethboonsan, an Asoke follower and assistant secretary to the Bangkok governor, Chamlong Srimuang said that 'the reaction against Asoke was fuelled by jealousy of other monks at the movement's popular appeal to a large number of followers' (*Bangkok Post,* 3.6.89). Sunai went on to suggest a debate between the two disagreeing factions (i.e. Santi Asoke and the Ecclesiastical Council).

The well-known social critic, Sulak Sivaraksa, responded to the crisis by urging Santi Asoke to leave the *Saṅgha* and become an independent entity with a new name and a change of uniform, commenting that Asoke should not be so obsessed

with the saffron robe. Sulak demonstrated even-handedness by making the point that '*The Saṅgha Act of 1962* upon which the verdict against Bodhirak was based had its origins in a time when Thailand was under the dictatorial rule of the late Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat' (*Bangkok Post,* 3.6.89).

The government clearly did not wish this controversy to escalate, or to draw criticism of the *Saṅgha* leadership. Interior minister Police General Pramarn Adireksarn 'ordered the Special Branch to "request" the press to refrain from favourable coverage of the Buddhist centre [Santi Asoke] which is in conflict the Ecclesiastical Council. Closure threats were also levelled against media running stories, cartoons and photographs deemed to ridicule the council or give a negative image of Buddhism' (*Bangkok Post,* 4.6.89). General Pramarn is recorded as defending himself by saying he was 'merely seeking co-operation from newspapers and had not ordered them to refrain from covering the issue'. The Reporters' Association of Thailand, although critical of General Pramarn, did not make an official complaint as the warning from the Interior Ministry had been verbal, not written (*Bangkok Post,* 4.6.89).

Bodhirak, after discussions with the Minister of Education on 9 June 1989, agreed to stop using the title '*phra*' and start wearing a different colour and style of robe from the mainstream monks.[32] According to Bodhirak's lawyer, Thongbai Thongpao, 'Bodhirak even consented not to identify his institutional activities with the word Buddha' (Poompanna, 1991:23). Phra Sophon Kanaporn, deputy abbot of Wat Bovornnivet, claimed that Bodhirak's change of robes was 'a trick to gain public sympathy'. He expressed the official line that Bodhirak's activities during the past years have been a 'threat to the teachings of the Lord Buddha', and that Bodhirak is 'destroying the whole structure of Buddhism in this country, creating disunity and causing the people to go astray' (Heikkilä-Horn, 1997:71). Bodhirak's compromise was not sufficient for the Ecclesiastical Council and the Education Minister Mana Rattanakoses insisted that the Asoke leader must agree to a formal defrocking ceremony before 17 June 1989 (*Bangkok Post,* 13.6.89).

A face-saving approach was taken by the National Tactical Operations Centre in an attempt to resolve the ecclesiastical conflict. It was reported that the plan had been presented to Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan, thus indicating the seriousness with which the conflict was now being taken. Bodhirak reported the loss of his identity card at Lard Prao police station. The monk then went to Bangkapi district office where he was photographed and provided with a temporary identity card in the name of Rak Rakpong, aged 55. 'One of Santi Asoke's lawyers, Police Lt-Colonel Rungrot Roengrit, who accompanied Bodhirak to the district office, said the centre's 79 other "monks" would begin applying for ID cards today' (*Bangkok Post,* 16.6.89). Chaipak Siriwat, secretary to the Minister of Education maintained that 'Bodhirak's application for an ID card was sufficient to signify departure from the monkhood and he hoped the Ecclesiastical Council would be satisfied' (*Bangkok Post,* 16.6.89). The same article which carried the headline 'Santi Asoke leader is now a layman' reported Phra Sophon Kanabhorn, assistant abbot of Wat Bovornnives, the leading Thammayut temple, as saying

'Phra Bodhirak, in legal terms is no longer a monk'. The deputy abbot added 'By the *Saṅgha* discipline, he should still have to utter the words that he is leaving the monkhood to complete the defrocking ceremony'.

The creative solution to the stand-off was unsuccessful and Phra Bodhirak was detained on 19 June 1989 'at the Police Private School in Bangkhen district on charges of violating *The Saṅgha Act of 1962* in failing to defrock himself.[33] The Santi Asoke leader was denied bail and his dark brown robe was changed for a white one at the detention centre' (*Bangkok Post,* 20.6.89). Heikkilä-Horn (1997:71) informs us that the 'Ministry of Interior announced that all TV coverage of the detention will be banned and that TV stations breaking the rule would simply be closed down. Press coverage was also restricted. The media coverage ban was a ploy to prevent Bodhirak's expected criticism of the Thai *Saṅgha* and its leadership from reaching the public. Santi Asoke took the opportunity to inform people that their leader did not wish to defrock and that by reciting the formula that he wished to leave the monkhood Bodhirak would be telling a lie: Bodhirak was quoted 'Would those senior persons who have *Dhamma* or ethics in mind be content to force someone to lie?' (*Bangkok Post,* 20.6.89).

Bodhirak was apparently unperturbed by his detention. Some 50 lay members of the movement arrived at the Police Private School. These included the well-known, socially engaged pop singer Yuenyong Opakul (better known as Ad Carabao). Santi Asoke monks went about their alms rounds as usual, in the area around their temple. Prime Minister General Chatichai indicated that the ban on reporting the arrest of Asoke leader applied only to TV stations, and 'the government felt it was not proper to give religious problems TV air time'. The prime minister continued 'We think that some unsuitable pictures might be publicised. This is a sensitive issue. We did not intend to cover up anything. Newspapers are free to report on the issue' (*Bangkok Post,* 21.6.89).

On 22 June 1989, Bodhirak was released on 20,000 Baht (£335) bail. The money was put up by an Asoke sympathiser. There had been representations from the Civil Liberties Union to permit bail for the Santi Asoke leader. The letter was signed by the union's president, Professor Samphon Hunayon who noted that the charge, if sustained, carried a maximum penalty of only six months imprisonment, and should not be considered serious. He also indicated that Bodhirak gave no indication of planning to escape. Professor Somphon's letter was in response to the refusal by the police to grant bail on the grounds that Phra Bodhirak's 'release could cause confusion and might trigger a confrontation between mainstream Buddhists and Santi Asoke followers' (*Bangkok Post,* 22.6.89). On the same day the human rights lawyer, Thongbai Thongpao, agreed to defend Bodhirak. He commented 'Bodhirak is no longer a monk in legal terms after he applied for an identification card' (*Bangkok Post,* 22.6.89).

Police investigators recommended that the public prosecutor charge Bodhirak and 'it was intended to set up a committee of 36 police officers to conduct further investigations in areas where Bodhirak's disciples are located' (*Bangkok Post,* 12.7.89). The following week it was reported that the abbot of Wat Pan-On in Muang District

was dismissed by a meeting of senior monks in Chiang Mai. The 43-year-old abbot was asked to sign a statement expressing his desire to resign for following the teachings of Santi Asoke. The abbot refused to sign the document, indicating that he went to many different centres such as Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Suan Mokkh to gain ideas about preaching the *Dhamma*. On 8 August 1989, all of the Asoke 105 clerics were detained for questioning at the Bangkhen Police Private School. Metropolitan Police Deputy Commissioner Police Major General Viroj Pao-In indicated that the police had now 'sufficient evidence to interrogate all Asoke monastics for allegedly defying Article 208 of the Penal Code'. This article 'specifies that whoever wrongfully dresses or uses a symbol to manifest that he is a priest, novice, holy man or clergyman of any religion is liable to imprisonment not exceeding one year, or a fine not exceeding 2,000 Baht, or both' (*Bangkok Post,* 9.8.89). On 9 August 1989 police released 26 of the 105 members of Santi Asoke 'after finding they were properly ordained as monks' (*Bangkok Post,* 12.8.89). The remaining seventy-nine monastics were released shortly after on bail of 8,000 Baht (£135) each.

Bodhirak and his seventy-nine clerical followers were ordered to be released on a temporary basis after investigators failed to complete their investigations in time. 'The Public Prosecutor said the eighty suspects were asked to report back to his office on 6 October 1989 for a decision on whether investigators had gathered sufficient evidence to support prosecution' (*Bangkok Post,* 9.9.89). A month later 1,500 people turned up to witness Bodhirak's second hearing. Defence lawyer Thongbai Thongpao cross-examined acting Director General of the Religious Affairs Department, Sanoh Puangpinyo.

> Mr Tongbai pointed out that *The Saṅgha Act of 1962* does not prohibit the setting up of a new Buddhist sect and Article 25 of the constitution gives the Thai people the right to religious beliefs. 'Moreover, Mr Thongbai presented documents such as an ID card, which showed that Mr Rak [Bodhirak] had complied with the *Saṅgha* Council's order to disrobe him. Mr Sanoh reportedly failed to reply to many questions
>
> (*Bangkok Post,* 5.10.89).

Defence lawyer Tongbai Thongpao was successful in his attempt to have the court consider as one case all 80 cases lodged against Phra Bodhirak and his 79 followers. 'Mr Tongbai reasoned that all 80 cases contain the same charges and require the same witnesses for examinations' (*Bangkok Post,* 21.2.90). Fifty-two lawyers were tasked to defend the accused who were being charged with imitating Buddhist monks (a violation of Article 208 of the Criminal Code). The trial was set for the first and third Thursdays of each month, and was appointed to be held in a civilian court. Amnesty International called on Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun and his government to drop legal action against the Santi Asoke leader and his seventy-nine followers, and end their persecution in court. The British-based human rights charity referred to each of the Asoke monastics as a 'potential prisoner of conscience' (*Bangkok Post,* 26.9.02).

The *Bangkok Post* of 30 December 1995 carried a summary of the court's findings. Bodhirak was not a monk authorised to conduct ordinations. He and his seventy-nine followers had no right to accept alms or wear saffron robes. The court sentenced Bodhirak to 66 months in prison and his followers to three months. The sentence was to be suspended for two years as there was no record of previous convictions. The court also found Bodhirak guilty for not meeting the defrocking deadline, although they acknowledged he stopped wearing the saffron robe and called himself Mr instead of *phra*. On the other hand, they noted he still received alms and referred to himself as *ātama*.[34] For this offence, the court handed down a six months suspended sentence to Bodhirak. The six-month sentence on the second charge was upheld by the Appeals Court on 19 March 1997. The 66-month suspended sentence (now for some reason 54 months) was upheld in the Supreme Court on 16 September 1998 (*Bangkok Post,* 17.9.98).

Santi Asoke, Chamlong Srimuang and Thai politics in the late 1980s and 1990s

Chamlong's association with Bodhirak clearly provided ammunition for his enemies to attack him. One week before the general election of 24 July 1988, Mr Sangwian Poorahong, president of the Parian Dhamma Association, expressed his organisation's intention to take action against Bodhirak because he had announced support for Chamlong and the Phalang Dhamma Party. Sangwian indicated that he would also 'ask the police department to investigate Phra Bodhirak and his followers for allegedly wearing Buddhist robes without authority'. He went on to say that if Santi Asoke were allowed to continue operating it 'could become a threat to the stability of Buddhism in Thailand' (*Bangkok Post,* 18.8.88). Sangwian acknowledged that Major General Chamlong had not violated the law, yet went on to protest that 'As a top administrator who could become prime minister in the future, he [Chamlong] should not support Santi Asoke, which has introduced a religious cult that could be detrimental to national security' (*Bangkok Post,* 18.7.88). Bodhirak responded the following day by saying 'he felt sorry for them [the Parian Dhamma Association] who misunderstood him but thanked them for thinking about him'. He went on to say 'he had not seen the Bangkok governor for several weeks'. The Asoke leader continued, 'We regard all people here (at the centre) as equals, and Governor Chamlong is one of the many people who are interested in studying the *Dhamma* at Santi Asoke' (*Bangkok Post,* 18.7.88).

In the *Bangkok Post* (29.5.89), Chamlong appeared in a photo taken at an Asoke monastery. He indicated that he had just returned from Surat Thani where he had spoken to several monks who practised the *Dhamma* at Suan Mokkh and they expressed sympathy for Santi Asoke.[35] He argued that Buddhadāsa, 'who is known never to hold reservations against corrupt practices of any monks, does not even say anything about Santi Asoke'. The governor pledged his attendance at a *Dhamma* ceremony the following week to mark a Santi Asoke anniversary. On the other hand,

there were some 14 members of the Phalang Dhamma Party who released a statement indicating that their party had no connection with Santi Asoke.

> The only connection was that our leader Maj General Chamlong went to practice the *Dhamma* at Santi Asoke' said Dr Udomsilp Sriangnam, the party's Secretary-General. Dr Udomsilp said he could not understand why Santi Asoke, which taught people to be good, had been attacked. In contrast, monks who distributed *palad khik* amulets (depicting the male sexual organ) were praised.
>
> (*Bangkok Post,* 25.5.89)

In January 1990, in the immediate wake of Bodhirak's trial, Chamlong was re-elected governor of Bangkok with a huge majority. Anti-Asoke members of the public sought to make an issue of the association between Chamlong and the outlawed movement.[36] Cleverly, Chamlong was able to cite the criminal court order on making public comments about Santi Asoke thereby silencing public criticism.[37] The relationship between Santi Asoke and Chamlong was a dilemma for the governor of Bangkok. While he trusted Asoke members who were politically involved with him, according to McCargo (1993:99) Chamlong did not wish Asoke members to be selected as parliamentary candidates as the connection with the movement was proving to be too problematic. There were those within Santi Asoke who continued to show respect to Chamlong but felt he could have done much more in their defence. Not only had many Asoke members volunteered their services to help Chamlong during his campaigns, but their political involvement had attracted both monastic and public criticism. Some may well have felt that this resulted in the ecclesiastic and civil court cases in 1988, following a period of relative silence.

In January 1992, Chamlong resigned his post as governor of Bangkok in order to stand for parliament. The Phalang Dhamma Party was very successful in the elections of March 1992, though according to McCargo (1997:102) there were virtually no Santi Asoke members among those elected from the Phalang Dhamma Party. A corollary of this was that Phalang Dhamma was perceived no longer to be closely associated with Santi Asoke. Indeed, there was a greater degree of tolerance towards the Asoke movement, possibly because it had been dealt with by the *Saṅgha*. When Suchinda, the non-elected army general who was imposed as the army's choice for prime minister, criticised Chamlong in parliament for trying to establish a new Buddhist order, he was not taken seriously. In fact, it was felt to be 'a ploy to divert attention from the real political issues at hand' (McCargo, 1997:102).

Chamlong's high-profile rally style of political protest, along with his fasting surprisingly went against him and the Phalang Dhamma Party in September 1992. The more people came to realise the 'blackness' of the events of May 1992, the more Chamlong was blamed (at least in part) for the deaths, injuries and disappearances (McCargo, 1997:276).[38] Chamlong's main political rival, Chuan Leekpai, was able to market his non-involvement in the protests of May 1992 as reasonable and polite,

claiming he had worked behind the scenes to help secure the king's intervention. McCargo (1997:278) points out that while some believed Chamlong had 'boldly risked his political future to challenge the NPKC's attempts to continue dictatorship', others (especially in Bangkok) favoured the democratic approach of Chuan to the confrontational approach of Chamlong.[39]

Chuan as leader of the party (Democrats) with most votes was elected prime minister. Chamlong was relegated to the back-benches as he had indicated prior to the election that he would only serve as prime minister, and in no other capacity. Veteran politician and economist Boonchu Rojanastien became the Phalang Dhamma leader; party MP's, however, continued to meet at Chamlong's house on Tuesday mornings. This resulted in both of Thailand's English newspapers to referring to Chamlong as 'the party's de facto leader from January 1993 until September 1994, when he resumed formal leadership of Phalang Dhamma' (McCargo, 1997:284).

Although honoured as a pro-democracy hero overseas, Chamlong's popularity within Thailand was waning.[40] This was perhaps best brought home to Chamlong on 22 July 1993 when he went to pacify protestors against the government's decision to use part of Lumpini Park in central Bangkok as a workshop for the new overhead railway. McCargo (1997:285) comments 'the once-loved former city governor found himself booed and jeered by an angry crowd in a nasty incident which almost turned violent'.[41] Chamlong was re-elected leader of Phalang Dhamma on 17 September 1994. This was despite the lack of support of half of the party's MP's who supported Boonchu, and felt Chamlong favoured the other half of the party which included some who were Asoke supporters. A month before the party elections, Bodhirak claimed that he had been calling on him [Chamlong] to withdraw from Phalang Dhamma since the MP's rebellion of 1990. He said that Chamlong had not taken his advice and had fallen into the trap of the Democrats because of power seekers among his party members (McCargo, 1997:290). It may well have been that the abbot could see that Chamlong was a 'yesterday man' in the ever-changing nature of Thai political life, and continued involvement would be unproductive for Chamlong, and therefore Santi Asoke.

Bodhirak's advice turned out to be sound. A change in the party's membership meant Chamlong had to make decisions based on compromise with ministers of a questionable political/financial reputation. After some months as deputy prime minister, Chamlong withdrew the support of Phalang Dhamma from the coalition government, which led to the collapse of the government led by Chuan Leekpai of the Democratic Party, and the general election of 2 July 1995. Chamlong resigned from leadership of Phalang Dhamma and was replaced by Taksin Shinawatra, satellite communications and mobile phone baron who was to become prime minister in 2000. Chamlong's attempt to return to his previous position was unsuccessful at the June 1996 elections for governor of Bangkok. Phalang Dhamma was virtually wiped out at the November 1996 general election, the Bangkok electorate dissatisfied with Taksin's political performance.

Chamlong and his wife Sirilak continue their association with Santi Asoke, but are not nearly as involved as they were during their years of political activity. They have a very small house (modelled on a monk's shelter, or Pāli *kuti*) in the grounds of Pathom Asoke, some 50 kilometres west of Bangkok, to which they sometimes retreat. Chamlong's energies are now focused on leadership training sessions for new generation politicians and emerging community and local government leaders. It could be argued that Chamlong's training programmes based in Kanchanaburi (Central Thailand) keep him from having more contact with Santi Asoke. There may also be some truth in the idea that Chamlong feels a certain 'loss of face' at not having listening to Bodhirak's advice to be less politically involved after ceasing to be Bangkok's governor.

Santi Asoke centres and activities

Santi Asoke in Bangkok

There are currently nine Santi Asoke centres in Thailand and each centre administers its own affairs. The Santi Asoke headquarters, located in the suburbs of Bangkok, 20 kilometres from the city centre, function loosely as the coordinating centre of the movement, with good transport links with the other centres. The land on which the temple and buildings are built was donated by an elderly female member. Surrounding land has been purchased, resulting in a fairly large centre. On the edge of the temple compound and fronting a very busy road are a number of shops and stalls belonging to the movement. The vegetarian restaurant is popular with Asoke supporters visiting the centre (especially at weekends) as well as non-Asoke members. Asoke members are pleased that non-Asoke vegetarian restaurants have recently opened up in the vicinity; there are now eight. The vegetable and fruit stalls, also noted for their value, are well patronised, as are the herbal medicine shops and the two supermarkets.

There is also a well-stocked air conditioned shop selling Asoke and other approved Buddhist publications and teaching tapes.[42] The results of a questionnaire indicated that 18 per cent of the respondents were first drawn to Santi Asoke through reading the movement's literature.[43] This relatively high percentage is not surprising given that Santi Asoke has its own printing press (Fah Apai Co. Ltd.) and is dedicated to spreading its teaching through low-cost or even free literature designed for different target groups such as students and farmers.[44] Current printing projects include *San Asoke*, the monthly Asoke newsletter which has a circulation of 9,000 copies.[45] *Dok Bua Noi* ('The Little Lotus') is a magazine aimed at young teenagers and 8,000 copies are published every two months. *Row Kit Aray* ('What We Think') contains a lot of articles written by Bodhirak; it is also a bi-monthly magazine with a circulation of 2,500 copies. The most widely circulated publication (22,000 copies) is the bimonthly magazine *Dok Yaa* ('Daffodil'). Each of these publications make use of creative artwork and reflect Bodhirak's training and continuing interest in that area.

There were two respondents (3.2 per cent) who indicated that they were first attracted to Santi Asoke through listening to the movement's radio programmes. The Asoke communities in Bangkok and Nakhon Phatom both broadcast part-time on FM local radio and serve to build a bridge between the movement and the community.[46] Only one respondent indicated that she was drawn to the movement through listening to teaching tapes. Santi Asoke produces a lot of such tapes and videos and it is surprising that they do not figure more significantly as the entry point into Asoke.

In the lanes leading away from the main road there are a number of houses which have been converted into microfactories, where, for example, medicines are prepared and packed, literature stored and shampoo produced and bottled. There is a medium-sized library which contains mainly Thai language Buddhist titles. A volunteer librarian is on hand to help Asoke members or visitors with their questions.

Asthetically, the focal point of Santi Asoke in Bangkok is the temple. The architectural style bears no resemblance to traditional Thai temples. The circular tower structure has seven floors, and has at its base a large man-made waterfall. The temple dome allegedly contains relics of the Buddha and *Arahats*. A number of Buddha images donated to the temple are housed in the dome as Bodhirak did not wish Asokans to develop a dependence on images. Indeed, he did not donate these images to other temples as he believed they already had too many images.[47] The whole area with its trees and water features is a symbol of part of what Asoke is seeking to do, that is, drawing people back to a simple lifestyle and a harmonious relationship with nature. As of 2006, the interior of the temple is still to be completed and volunteer artists and other craftsman are working on projects which depict scenes from the life of the Buddha and Bodhirak. One mural depicts a policemen and a senior monk pointing at Bodhirak and declaring him to be an enemy of Buddhism – a clear reference to the court case against the movement, and its subsequent excommunication by the *Mahā thera samakom*. The Thai national flag and the Santi Asoke flag both fly from the top of the temple. The latter is a white ring on a brown background. The circle represents a mind free from all attachments; this is the Asokan understanding of emptiness (Pāli *sūnyatā*).

Pathom Asoke

Pathom Asoke is located at Nakhon Pathom, a 90-minute drive from the centre of Bangkok. A modern building houses the school and a state of the art recording studio where CD's are cut and videos edited and produced. A tofu factory (which also produces soya milk), large mushroom farm, charcoal producing station, small production centres for producing herbal medicines, food flavouring and natural fertilisers are all to be found on the 100 *rai* of land at Pathom Asoke.[48] Considerable effort is put into garbage recycling, and a resident inventor has for some time been working to develop a gas fuel produced by the burning of garbage.

There are eight organic vegetable gardens at Pathom Asoke, totalling about 12 acres. Most of the food consumption of the community is met by the produce of these gardens. A wide range of fruits and vegetables are grown but rice cultivation stopped several years ago. Rice is obtained from the other Asoke centres and from groups within the natural farming network. Here, as at other centres, the school children are involved in farming work. Indeed, the adults working without the assistance of the young people would be unable to produce such large quantities.

Asoke communities do not use modern agriculture chemicals such as pesticides and fertilisers. Santi Asoke was one of the first organisations in Thailand to start practising organic farming.

> By following the first precept of Buddhism we vow to not harm any living creature, including insects, such as those found on and below the soil surface (and of course mosquitoes and flies have to be counted as living creatures!). And by farming organically, there is no harm arising from modern agricultural chemicals to ourselves, to customers who buy our product, or to other creatures.
>
> (Santos, undated:5)

In order to minimise damage to the soil, there is in the Asoke communities a reluctance to plough, or otherwise disturb the soil.

In the Asoke communities a lot of reflection on practice and learning from experience takes place. This is particularly true of the agricultural work. Some 9 years ago in the Asoke communities there was a strong focus on putting into practice the Fukuoka approach to natural farming.[49] The mix of crops within a small space all maturing at different times does not overtax the soil. Although good soil management, it was found to require a lot of effort by those gathering in the produce, as large amounts were required for cooking and sending to the other centres. What was good practice then for a household was inappropriate for a large community. Another example of agricultural development is the improved quality of organic compost. The process is started by a microbe soup to which organic materials such as food scraps and leaves are added. The compost, which has a lot of microbiological life in it, is ready to use after a 20-day maturation process. Another method used to enrich the soil is the use of charred rice husks, as they have a high alkaline content which serve to balance out the acidic soil.[50]

Sali Asoke and the **Puttha Pisek** *festival*

Sali Asoke is located outside the small town of Phai Sali, an hour's drive from the provincial capital of Nakhon Sawan. From 6 to 10 February 2001, I joined over 1,000 Asoke members for the annual *Puttha Pisek* ceremony. This coincides with the *Makha Bucha* day ceremony which is a public holiday in Thailand.[51] In mainstream temples, after chanting by the monks in the evening, there is a clockwise circumambulation of the main pagoda three times by lay people who have candles and lotus

flowers in their hands. The ritual is referred to in Thai as *tien wein*. While mainstream practice focuses on the circumambulation, Asokans emphasise listening to sermons by Bodhirak.[52] *Puttha Pisek* has the meaning in Thai Buddhism of making existing images, statues or artifacts powerful through the chanting of a group of monks. The intensive five-day training programme at Sali Asoke is referred to as *Puttha Pisek*.[53] Asokans are further polishing their buddha-nature, and bringing out the best in themselves through intense activity (as opposed to chanting over artifacts in order to sacralise them!). Here then is a jibe at mainstream practice, as well as an affirming comment on the Asoke spiritual development programme. This ceremony attracts all the monastics and the vast majority of temple dwellers, as well as committed members (*yatitham*) who do not reside at the Asoke centres.

The hospitality of the Asoke people was impressive. I was provided with a *klot*, two schoolboys were detailed to instruct me how to use it, and to show me around the centre grounds. For the duration of my five-day visit, I was provided with an informant who took me on tours of the centre, introduced me to many of the conferees, and sought to answer my many questions. Asoke communities are accustomed to researchers and appreciate any interest shown in the movement.

During the *Puttha Pisek* ceremony, the lay community live like the monks. A typical day started with rising at 3 am in order to be ready for chanting in the *bot* at 3.15 am[54] The monastic community are at the front of the *bot* and when the half-hour chanting session is complete, they turn round to face the audience. In accordance with Thai monastic tradition the most senior monk (Bodhirak) sits on the extreme left of the audience, and then monks sit in a line in an order dictated by date of ordination. At 3.45 am Bodhirak commenced his sermon, which lasted for two hours. The theme of this year's *Puttha Pisek* was 'Emotional Quotient'. Bodhirak read from his 288 page book *EQ Lokuttara*, and commented on issues raised by the text.[55]

After the sermon was completed, monks, *sikkhamats* and lay people prepared to go around the various villages in the area on an alms round.[56] The alms round terminated at the Asoke centre with members who did not go on the alms round giving to the monastics. After all the food was prepared, the monks, *sikkhamats* and novices took and ate their food. Lay people then lined up in two rows, sitting cross-legged, and facing each other. Apart from families with young children, men and women remained segregated. Large pots of food were passed down the rows of people. What is being emphasised in this method of eating is dependence on the land, valuing of traditional rural, community orientated Thai culture and simple lifestyle. This is accentuated by the simple peasant-style clothes worn by the lay people. The image of the poor farmer then is used to express Asoke values of simple lifestyle and world renouncing anti-materialism. This is further reinforced once everyone was ready to eat by a blessing said for the farmers and others who had worked hard to produce the food. While a good number of the movement are from rural backgrounds, Apinya Feungfusakul is unaware of Asoke members who are poor farmers who subsist on farming a small patch of rented land.[57] Those who are farmers within the Santi Asoke movement tend to own sizeable amounts of

land and cannot be considered to be poor. Feungfusakul's point is that the image of the peasant does not reflect the reality of the membership's socio-economic status. This is an important observation, and one perspective is to view the peasant focus as a symbol for communicating the Asoke value system. There again, it would be hard *not* to project the peasant image given the need to dress simply, because of manual work in vegetable gardens, rice fields or cottage industries. These cheap, blue, loose-fitting clothes function as a kind of non-military uniform (green clothes would be viewed as sinister due to its military connotation) which identify the wearers as Asoke members when they travel away from the base communities. A corollary of wearing peasant-style clothing and eating in the style that they do is the creation of an impression of a rural community from a previous generation.

A vegetarian meal is the only meal of the day for monastics and most temple dwellers. Children and those who are unwell eat again in the late afternoon. My informant asked me how I enjoyed the food; he was dissatisfied with my positive response and told me that the correct answer was 'it is not tasty, and it is not not tasty, it is nourishing'. This comment gives us an insight into the intensity of Asoke principles and practice. Eating is yet another opportunity to practise both mindfulness and non-attachment. I soon found out there was even an Asoke method of washing dishes, which minimised the use of water, made maximum use of scraps of left over food and provided another opportunity of practising mindfulness. When the meal was completed, lay people took the opportunity to approach the monastics with their requests and questions.

At midday, a bell was rung and everyone broke off their activities to meditate for one minute for world peace; this is a daily ritual throughout the Asoke communities. There was often some time at this stage in the day for conferees to talk to each other. The topics of conversation tended to focus on fairly weighty issues such as the benefits of organic farming, vegetarianism, the teachings of the Buddha, and how individuals were developing in the practice of the *Dhamma*. The Chow[58] Asoke standard greeting to members and outsiders alike is not '*sawadee*' but '*charun tham*', the Thai for 'prosper in the *Dhamma*'.[59] This greeting is an example of how the movement is seeking to return to a basic society founded on the teachings of the Buddha. It reacts against what is perceived to be a meaningless Thai greeting *sawadee*, as well as an informal Western greeting such as 'Hi!'

Asoke members show great respect to those more senior than themselves. Yet the lack of formal respect they offer mainstream monks is noticeable. It is not uncommon to have mainstream monks attend some of the Asoke meetings; there were six or so at the *Puttha Pisek* event I attended. When asked about this, my informant told me that mainstream monks did not have the high standards of the Chow Asoke, therefore did not merit the same respect. Santi Asoke, however, is less overtly critical of mainstream monks than they used to be.

In the afternoon, one could attend a demonstration of how to prepare and use natural fertiliser for organic farming. There were also a number of small groups of lay people sitting around a monk or *sikkhamat* asking questions and engaging in discussion. Quite a number of lay people did the rounds of the small groups

and settled where they found an interesting topic being discussed. The last hour, or so, of the afternoon was spent bathing, washing clothes and preparing *klots* for bedtime at around 9 pm.

The evening meetings (held outside) started with music and singing by some of the schoolchildren. Schoolchildren from all the Asoke centres were present, and were involved in the catering arrangements, moving equipment around and setting up and monitoring the sound and lighting systems. This was followed by a talk on diet and exercise by a panel of doctors. The evening was concluded with a talk from Bodhirak which included answering questions from the audience.

Santi Asoke communities in North-East Thailand

Sisa Asoke is located in the north-east province of Sisaket. It was opened in 1976 and although smaller than Phatom Asoke has a similar range of shops, gardening and farming facilities. Sima Asoke, which was opened in 1990, is located in the province of Nakhon Ratchasima. It has a large mushroom farm, orchards and produces noodles from rice flour. These products are used in the vegetarian restaurant in Nakhon Ratchasima, the capital town of the province. The third centre is located in the province of Ubon Ratchathani, and is referred to as Ratchathani Asoke. It was opened in 1997. The last centre to open in the north-east region is Hin faa faa nam in Chaiyabhum.[60]

Santi Asoke in North Thailand

In 1995, a centre was opened one hour's drive from Chiang Mai, the principal city in the north of Thailand. Referred to as Lana[61] Asoke, or Bhu pha faa nam, it is 800 metres above sea level, and is fast building a reputation for experimenting with natural agriculture.[62] New monks spend their first five *phansa* studying at Lana Asoke under the tutelage of a senior monk.[63] Some years ago, Asoke communities experimented with having Wednesdays as a silent day. The adults, as far as possible, and certainly the monastics, did not speak. This practice has been discontinued except at Lana Asoke where Wednesday remains a day of silence.

The vegetarian restaurant in Chiang Mai is large, housing the ten or so volunteers who work there, and providing accommodation for visiting monastics. Its location on the outskirts of the city and its closure over the weekends mean that it does not have the influence it might in terms of propagating its vegetarian message, and raising the Asoke profile. A more central location would seem desirable, given the large numbers of students in the city, as well as world travellers, many of them on a spiritual search.

Santi Asoke in South Thailand

The only centre in the southern part of the kingdom is Taksin Asoke in Trang, which is very close to the Thai border with Malaysia.

Membership of the movement

In 1995 there were ninety-two *samaṇas* and twenty-three *sikkhamats*. This increased to 102 *samaṇas* and 25 *sikkhamats* by March 2001. There were 9,929 registered members in 2001 but there are also a large number, perhaps several thousand, who are in sympathy with the movement and follow its activities with interest. In 2005 there were 105 *samaṇas* and 27 *sikkhamats* but no figure was available for registered membership. One indicator of the membership must surely be the number of monthly Asoke newsletters circulated to temple dwellers and registered members. Currently (2006) this stands at 9,000 copies. It may be that in the interests of saving paper Asoke do not circulate to each temple dweller and expect them to share. That said it appears that there is no growth in membership. This is contrary to members' perception that the movement is growing. This perception may be partly caused by the steady stream of visitors to Asoke centres.

Education of children and youth

Education of children

Some Thai schools are located on temple grounds, a reminder that traditionally schools were part of the temple and monks functioned as teachers. The Asoke movement have schools at their centres and they are staffed by volunteers. Some of the teachers are members of the movement; others are more loosely associated and teach on a part-time basis. In the Bangkok community there are around thirty to forty teachers, with a variety of visiting specialists who help in this manner.[64] These schools are recognised by the Ministry of Education and mainly serve the children of Asoke members or supporters. The school children wear blue uniforms, and at national and interschool events their respective centres may be identified according to the colours of their Boy Scout style scarves. There are currently 590 school children in the various Asoke communities.

In addition to the usual syllabus, collaborative working, art, music and Buddhist morals are particularly emphasised in the Asoke schools. Pupils who enter the Asoke secondary school system, regardless of their age, are required to start in the first year of the school programme. They and their parents are interviewed in Bangkok, and if the committee believe it to be appropriate for the pupils to commence schooling within the Asoke system, they are then accepted. If a pupil wishes to study at another Asoke centre, then he/she has to have an additional interview at that location. Much of the content of the teaching is negotiated between students and their teachers. If a student wishes to pursue a particular study interest towards the end of secondary education, then Asoke can provide specialist input through one of its lay members. Recent examples of this are studies in civil engineering and English language.

Exiting a highly structured community poses a challenge for any leaver. This is particularly true for the school children who have gone through the Asoke system

and intend continuing with their education at university or college. Some have successfully made that transition. Many opt to continue with the familiar and remain in the Asoke communities. As they have been raised with the concept that 'more is less' and possessions lead to suffering there is no incentive to go and make money. The retention of youth within the movement is crucial for the survival of Asoke. Many of these high school graduates are key workers in the agricultural and small-factory programmes.

Childrens'camps

Santi Asoke also organise camps for children and young people, typically ages range from 5 to 15 years, and the camps which run for about a week will focus on developing self-reliance. The first camp was organised in 1985 and currently around 500 children attend these camps. *Samaṇa* Thera Chitta, an Asoke member for 20 years commented 'initially the camp attracted only children of parents who often frequented the Asoke community and those who could not afford to pay huge sums to send their children to expensive camps, but now well off parents were increasingly sending their children to the community' (*Bangkok Post,* 19.4.99). The results of these camps include children returning home and helping parents with the household chores, keeping their clothes and rooms clean, and no longer snacking between meals.

Tertiary education

A course is now offered within the Asoke movement for those who wish to study beyond secondary school. The name initially given to the programme, *Mahālai Wang Chiwit*, drew the criticism that it was misleading, as it created the impression of an institute for higher learning (*Bangkok Post,* 8.6.96).[65] Santi Asoke responded by saying the name meant a great place to live. The name was adjusted shortly afterwards to *Sammasikkhalaya Wang Chiwit*, and is normally shortened to *Wang Chiwit*. While conventional learning focuses on the study of textbooks and classroom based learning, the Asoke approach is that one's inner world is the most complex subject of study. The Asokan teaching approach thus emphasises constant practice at trying to reduce one's ego and selfishness through reducing greed and by working with other people. Nomdin Thayatham, one of the academy teachers, comments, 'Our aim is to study how to live a moral life and how to be self sufficient so that we will not be a burden on nature, or society' (*Bangkok Post,* 23.8.96). *Wang Chiwit*'s educational philosophy, according to one Thai educationalist associated with the programme, is best expressed in their slogan 'Orthodox in keeping *sīla*, efficient in working, and knowledgeable in studying subjects' (Asoketrakul, undated:6).[66]

The *Wang Chiwit* students are referred to as *nisit*, meaning 'inhabitants', as they are required to be resident in their respective communities throughout their

training. The *Wang Chiwit* programme was first started at Sima Asoke in Nakorn Ratchasima, but is also available at Pathom Asoke and Santi Asoke in Bangkok. In 2003 there were approximately 40 *nisit*, many of whom had completed their secondary education within the Asoke system. This figure rose to 241 in 2005. The significant growth may have been caused by Bodhirak's vision for lay members not to stagnate but to continue to grow through facing new and continuing challenges. The minimum age for entry to the *Wang Chiwit* programme is eighteen and there is no upper limit. While there is no academic entry requirement for the programme, candidates are required to live for a probationary year in an Asoke community and to pass an interview with a committee made up of *samaṇas, sikkhamats* and teachers. They are required to keep the Eight Precepts which according to the Asoke tradition includes being a vegan. Successful completion of the course leads to the award of a certificate (*panyabat*). A minimum period of six years is required for a *nisit* to complete his/her course at *Wang Chiwit*. A *nisit* may continue on the programme for as long as he/she wishes, provided the Eight Precepts are observed. Indeed, the longer the period, the more beneficial it may be for the *nisit* in making positive and permanent behavioural change (Asoketrakul, undated:6).

In terms of curriculum design, there is a strong focus on ecology, natural farming and Buddhism. Assessment of students is rigorous. It comprises of self-evaluation, peer and community members' evaluation as well as the evaluation of teachers. The 'learning-through-work' approach involves a lot of personal experiment. For example, each student will be given land to be responsible for, as well as being involved in one of the many cottage industries which are located at the Asoke centres. Once a week *nisits*, like all other temple dwellers, reflect in a group setting on how well they have kept the Precepts. This is referred to as *check sin* and involves the filling in of a form for each Precept.[67] In the context of a discussion with a *samaṇa* or *sikkhamat*, ways are examined of overcoming besetting failures. No *nisit* has yet completed the course and thus received the award of a certificate (*panyabat*).[68] It would be of interest to know what status potential employers place on the training given to Asoke graduates. Concerning employability of future graduates, Asoke member Somporn Soraniyo commented 'Whether they get jobs depends on the faith each work place has in Santi Asoke' (*Bangkok Post,* 6.7.96). It is quite likely, however, that many of the graduates will opt to stay as temple residents.

Annual festivals other than *Puttha Pisek*

Pluksek is similar to *Puttha Pisek*. The *Pluksek* ceremony takes place for seven days in April at Sisa Asoke. *Pluksek* is the term given to the setting aside of an item by a monk and his reciting a short Pāli formula over it. This is believed to sacralise the object so that it is considered sacred and contains power, for example, an amulet which is believed to ward off danger. The extremely rigorous week-long Asoke practice and listening to sermons for hours each day really wakes members

up and brings out the power from within![69] This is another example of how spiritual development is recognised as taking place within the Asoke communities, as opposed to what they consider to be the 'superstitious' practices of mainstream Buddhism.

The Asoke remembrance day and the veneration of the relic of the Buddha day celebration (Thai *Asoke Lamluk*) is a ceremony which takes place at Santi Asoke in Bangkok. It was the wish of Asokans to have a ceremony on Bodhirak's birthday (5 June). The founder, however, expressed a preference to mark the occasion (9 June) when he ceased to function as a *Saṅgha* accredited monk and began to function independently as a monk. Thus, Bodhirak and his fellow monks ceased to use the title *phra* (Thai title for a Buddhist monk) and changed to using *samaṇea* (Pāli word for monk). This is an occasion to commemorate the Asoke court case when the movement was accused of being unorthodox in its practice. The following day (10 June) there is the veneration of a relic of the Buddha housed in the dome of the temple. There is a carnival atmosphere about this 'get together' which runs for several days, unlike the austere *Pluksek* and *Puttha Pisek* gatherings.

The *Mahāpawarana* celebration lasts for five days and takes place in Pathom Asoke after the rainy season (*phansa*) when monastics remain in their monasteries. This period in early November is a time when elections of new abbots to the various *putthasatans* take place. Heikkilä-Horn (1997:131) comments that for the monastics the most important part of the ceremony is the gathering, where the monastics criticise each other. The monks and *sikkhamats* have their day-long *Mahāpawarana* meetings on separate days. No lay people are allowed to attend the meetings and discussions are never reported to lay followers.

The New Year Celebration and the *Ariya* Fair takes place at Ratchathani Asoke, and goods are sold at less than the cost of producing them as an act of merit-making and goodwill to the community (Asoketrakul, undated:3).

Structure of the Asoke communities

Each of the Asoke centres has an abbot (Thai *somphaan*).[70] If it is a busy centre where there is a heavy administrative load, the abbot may have a deputy *rong somphaan*. If the work load is especially heavy, an assistant abbot (Thai *phu chuei somphaan*) may be appointed. Each year, as we have seen, during *Mahāpawarana*, abbots are appointed for each centre and the monks alone are involved in making these decisions. The terms of service for abbots may be extended if they so wish, and if the results of the centre are good in terms of agricultural production and moral development of those associated with the centre (Heikkilä-Horn, 1997:64). Bodhirak is the movement's overall leader, and presides at the main meetings, as well as functioning as a consultant to the abbots and other leaders. He normally resides at Ratchathani Asoke but regularly spends time at the two other large centres of Pathom and Santi Asoke. This is due to the work at these three centres being more developed than at the other centres, and

thus requiring more attention to detail. He is always accompanied by at least one other monk. Even when he is sleeping he has someone close to his *kuti*; one reason for this practice is to avoid any suspicion of impropriety.

A committee comprising of all the abbots and deputies is referred to as the 'monks' committee'. There is also a monks' assembly, which includes all the monks in the Asoke movement. This committee considers, approves or rejects the plans put forward by the abbots for the development of the work of the centres, as well as working through some of the more serious problems of the centres (Heikkilä-Horn, 1997:67). Hierarchy is considerably flattened, compared for example to Wat Phra Dhammakāya. Each Asoke centre has an elected committee which meet monthly under the chairmanship of a monk.[71] The work of each centre is discussed monthly by committee members who represent different aspects of the centre's work. There is a board displaying the names and photographs of current committee members located at a central point at each Asoke temple (*putthasathan*).

The initial administrative structure to be started at Santi Asoke was the Santi Foundation (*monitee*). It was jokingly referred to as the 'ministry of the interior' by my informant! It is run by a committee of approximately twelve members who are elected each year. Interestingly, the chairperson is referred to as 'the servant' (*phu rap chai*), and is assisted by a secretary and a treasurer. There are no ordained people on the committee but monks may be consulted. The monthly meeting of this committee is held in Bangkok, but there is a cross section of representatives from the other Asoke communities. Bodhirak also attends the monthly committee meeting. Those who serve on this committee will work full time in administering the business of the community. The following four examples indicate key aspects of the committee's work:

- Schools: there are schools at almost all of the nine communities. In 2002, the principal ones were Sisa Asoke: 200 pupils, Pathom Asoke: 200 pupils, Santi Asoke: 85 pupils, Sali Asoke: 60 pupils and Chiang Mai: 35 pupils;
- *Gong Bun*: also known as *sawadeegaan*. This deals with the basic issues of accommodation, health and medicine, food, clothing and travel;
- *Pa Tea San Tan*: this covers the work of telephone counselling as people contact the centres to seek advice (some members are set aside to provide this service). It includes receiving people from outside the movement, providing information and face-to-face counselling;
- Administration: examples of this include ensuring that all community bills are paid, negotiating with government departments and service providers, for example, water board and electricity department.

Chamlong Srimuang was partially responsible for setting up the *Gong Thab Tham* (Dhamma Army) and continues to be elected each year as president. This foundation may be referred to as the 'ministry of the exterior'! This was started two years after the *Santi* Foundation and has the same structure of election and monthly meeting.

A significant responsibility of the Dhamma Army is to liaise with those who request speakers from Santi Asoke to speak at particular meetings, for example, university societies or clubs. Asoke local radio announces where meetings are to be held and invites members of the public to attend. A fairly typical programme might include a vegetarian cooking demonstration along with a presentation of the movement's basis beliefs. The preparing and serving of vegetarian food free of charge is known as *Rong Boon Mangsewerak* and offers Asoke people the opportunity to share their belief that there is great merit in reducing animal suffering. Large-scale vegetarian food festivals are held by all the communities on two to three occasions each year, the key occasion being the king's birthday.

The Dhamma Practitioner's Society came into being as the government would not accept the vegetarian restaurants as a non-profit making charity, and thus full tax was required to be paid by the restaurants. This society, known in Thai as '*Samakom Phu Patepattam*' has responsibility for the vegetarian restaurants and a variety of other projects such as vehicles, teaching tapes and videos, the libraries and the natural farming network.

Conclusion

Bodhirak seems to have the Chinese characteristics of hard working and straight talking. His success as a TV programmer and song writer meant he was used to forging his own way through life. Clearly a natural leader, it was never going to be easy for him to follow others. Bodhirak's re-ordination in 1973 in the Mahānikai tradition, and the forming of his own group mimics the culture of protest that was emerging in Thai society at that time. Many students (but also trade unionists) demonstrated against the military's practice of replacing government leadership at will. At the heart of these demonstrations was the desire for democracy.

Bodhirak's own quest was to practise Buddhism which had distinctives, such as rigorous lifestyle, vegetarianism, non-acceptance of financial donations except from those who knew the movement well and a rationalistic approach to teaching. This approach coupled with Bodhirak's charismatic style of leadership struck a chord with many who were disenchanted with mainstream Thai Buddhism and wished to be part of a radical and supportive community. Bodhirak's working-class Chinese background, and lack of connections with the establishment, understandably appealed to those from a similar milieu. Many young people joined Santi Asoke around that time. Indeed, many have remained with the group since its inception in the mid-1970s.

Proceedings against Bodhirak were not nearly as traumatic for Santi Asoke as the legal proceedings against Phra Dhammachayo proved to be for Wat Phra Dhammakāya. Excommunication of Santi Asoke from the *Saṅgha* seems to have been gradual. Initial proceedings were taken by the *Mahā thera samakom* against Bodhirak and the Asoke group in 1979. In 1991 Asoke monks ceased using the title *phra* (venerable) and began to wear a different colour of robe from mainstream monks. Santi Asoke temples were referred to as *putthasathan* rather than

wat (temple).[72] In 1989, Asoke ordained members were detained by the police but later released. At the end of 1995 a court judged that Bodhirak and his fellow monks had no right to accept alms or wear the saffron robes of mainstream Thai Buddhist monks. In 1998 Bodhirak received a suspended prison sentence which was never served on the grounds that he had no previous convictions.

In the early days, Santi Asoke was extremely vocal in its criticisms of the Thai *Saṅgha*. The movement is now considerably less high profile. For example, it no longer goes on its peripatetic mission, or *charik*. It remains largely within the confines of its *putthasathan* and functions more as a model for harmonious living, rather than mounting hostile opposition to mainstream Thai Buddhism.

Asoke's perceived close relationship with the Phalang Dhamma political party was viewed as highly inappropriate by traditionalists within and out with the *Saṅgha*. Nearly half of the 319 party members who were candidates in the 1988 general election were Santi Asoke followers. Indeed, McCargo (1993:48) points out that 'an early action of the Chatahai Choonavan government was to reopen the file on Santi Asoke'. Of course the *Saṅgha* legitimises the state, and functions on occasions as its mouthpiece. In return, the state protects the *Saṅgha*. This symbiotic relationship has been viewed as both appropriate and necessary; yet any relationship between groups within these institutions, in this case Santi Asoke and the Palang Dhamma Party, is viewed as subversive. The leaders of both groups, Bodhirak and Chamlong, both came from humble backgrounds, were viewed as excessively moralistic, and their special relationship together was viewed by many as a serious challenge to the status quo and national security. It is little wonder that monastic persecution of Santi Asoke intensified shortly after the start of the association between Santi Asoke and the Phalang Dhamma party.

The high-school students in the Asoke communities are a valuable labour resource. This is facilitated by a curriculum which has a strong focus on agriculture and cottage industries. While developing discipline, team working/leadership skills and mental awareness students are able to contribute effectively to the livelihood of their respective communities. On graduation many continue as valued adult members of the movement and have an increased input into the communities.

Santi Asoke's nine communities provide support for those who wish to engage in serious religious practice.[73] Although highly structured, decision making is often devolved to those who are most affected. The *mu glum*, or 'will of the group' is a highly valued process of decision making – as well as an effective tool for disciplining new members! The next chapter examines the distinctives of Santi Asoke and offers understandings of the movement from both within and outwith the movement.

6

THE DISTINCTIVES OF SANTI ASOKE AND AN ANALYSIS OF THE MOVEMENT

Four inside (*emic*) understandings of the movement – the appeal of Santi Asoke to its membership

We have a leader with qualities of amnāt, ittipon *and* pāramī

As we have seen at the beginning of Chapter 3, most discussed aspects of leadership in the Thai context are authority/power (*amnāt*), influence (*ittipon*) and moral stature or charisma (*pāramī* Pāli and Thai). By pioneering the Asoke movement, Bodhirak achieved *amnāt*, something which would not have been granted to him by the *Saṅgha* because of his constant criticism of its practice. An aspect of *amnāt* is that it is depleted through use as excessive usage strains relationships.[1] Bodhirak's economic use of *amnāt* means that he continues to retain it, thus retaining his followers. On the occasions he uses it, it is always perceived by members to be for the common good of the movement and never for his own benefit.

In order for effective leadership to take place *amnāt* needs to be supplemented by influence (*ittiphon*) and/or moral stature (*pāramī*). Due to his excommunication from mainstream Thai Buddhism, Bodhirak has very little status outside the movement he founded. Within his movement he is held in such high regard that it would appear he does not need to intentionally use his influence to get things done in a particular way.

Pāramī , the third component of leadership, originates in the moral goodness or virtue (*kwam dī*) of the individual (Conner, 1996:240). Those observing Bodhirak's selfless behaviour directed towards them develop a sense of appreciation for his moral goodness. As a result, a bonding takes place where followers respond with a sense of obligation (*bun khun*) to Bodhirak.

In the questionnaire (Q3b, part two) completed by some Asoke members, almost half the responders indicated that they joined the movement through the influence of an Asoke member.[2] It is significant to note that in 26 per cent of all responses Bodhirak is cited as a person who advised them to begin to practise. Bodhirak is accessible despite his busy schedule. This is in sharp contrast to Pha Dhammachayo of Wat Phra Dhammakāya, who meets only with the temple's senior leadership. It is interesting, however, that one in every eight males in the

survey indicated that Bodhirak had been a factor in influencing them to practise with the movement. On the other hand, one in every three female respondents indicated that Bodhirak advised them to begin to practise in the Asoke tradition. An accurate conclusion may not be made from such a small sample, yet perhaps there is a hint that Bodhirak is viewed as a 'male-friend figure' and protector by many females, whereas he may be viewed more of an 'authority figure' by some males.

Bodhirak's high moral standing among Asoke members, his rhetoric and sagacity, as well as his track record of guiding Asoke through its turbulent history, mean that he is viewed as an inspiring leader with great *pāramī*. Members of the movement believe that Bodhirak is *the* true teacher of Buddhism, a being with a high level of enlightenment. The flattened hierarchical structure of Santi Asoke and the approachability of Bodhirak appeal to the Thai appreciation of freedom and the dislike of the inappropriate use of *amnāt* and *ittiphon*.

We help members to be free from suffering

Many people come to the Asoke communities suffering from strained family relationships, or other disappointments/hardships in life. The regimented, ascetic lifestyle and advice from temple dwellers who have worked through similar issues provide a supportive context for dealing with suffering. This theme of liberation from suffering emerges from the following responses to the questionnaire: In response to Question 3b (part one), 'Why did you start this practice?' 13 per cent of the responders indicated that it was 'to move beyond suffering'. There was an identical response to Question 6, 'What attracted you to become a member of this movement?' Replying to Question 4 'What advice would you give to someone who wished to gain *nibbāna*?' 21 per cent of responders specifically mentioned being 'free from' or 'moving beyond' suffering as part of their definition of *nibbāna*.

Santi Asoke's approach is to teach people to get rid of suffering, step by step. First, they teach them self-control and morality (*sīla*), they then demonstrate meditation (s*amādhi*) which leads to *paññā*, or understanding of nature (*Bangkok Post,* 22.7.88). Asokans are convinced that material wealth and possessions produce suffering. The solution to the problem of suffering, then, is to give away one's wealth and possessions. The Asoke communities throughout the kingdom are places where a person who wishes to be rid of all attachments will receive acceptance and support from people with similar goals.

We are 'just' communities

Suffering is not only caused by one's attachments but also by the lack of justice in society. It is seen as difficult for a person who wishes to practise morality to function in the warp and woof of Thai government service, or business life. To take a stand against bribery and corruption has implications for others.

Commenting on the retirement of General Prem from government leadership in 1989, a Bangkok taxi driver remarked to me 'A good person cannot stay, nobody likes him'.[3] An Asoke friend informed me that he worked as a government forestry officer and would not permit illegal logging in his area. Those whose businesses had been affected by his moral stand bombed his house. The government department responded by transferring him to a different department in another part of the country. This person now attends Santi Asoke in Bangkok at the weekends and has a limited experience of what it is to be in, and contribute to a just society.

Living in a community which is orientated to moral living leads to a reduction in suffering. It is also a key to spiritual development, a common Asoke belief is 'If you want to purify your heart you need good friends' (*Bangkok Post,* 3.9.02). In response to Question1, 'What practices do you engage in so that you progress and reach *nibbāna*?' 6.7 per cent of responders cited the importance of being part of a good community and having good friends. Two quotes which are representative of this are: 'have friends that facilitate your development' and 'become a member of a practising group, have good friends and live in a supportive situation'.

Our practice of purification works

In response to Question 6, 'What attracted you to become a member of this movement?' 29 per cent of the responders viewed Santi Asoke as the place where the truth was taught and put into practice. A good number mentioned practice/practise more than once in their answers. For example: 'If you practise together it will be more effect than practising alone. The effect of practice is to cool you down.' Also, 'The teacher puts into practice that which he/she teaches. I get results when I put the teaching into practice.'

Many Asoke members in common with their founder come from Chinese backgrounds where people tend to be pragmatic and industrious. It is hardly surprising, then, that their religious practice should have a strong activist strand. Asoke practice focuses on carrying out (often mundane) tasks with mindfulness. This process is an essential part of spiritual development but what is achieved is viewed as work which needs to be completed. Further indication of a pragmatic approach to assessing spiritual development is the number of responders who suggested that their practices must be correct because they result in a reduction of suffering and an increase in wisdom.

Four key distinctives of Santi Asoke practice

Status of female renunciates in Santi Asoke

There is an account in the *Vinaya Piṭaka* of the Buddha seemingly reluctantly agreeing to allowing Mahāpajāpatī, his aunt and foster-mother to become a female mendicant on the death of her husband. Ānanda, clearly moved by

Mahāpajāpatī's commitment asked the Buddha if women were capable of attaining enlightenment, as men were.[4] When the Buddha responded positively, Ānanda reminded the Buddha of all that Mahāpajāpatī had done for him and again requested that Mahāpajāpatī (and other women) be admitted to Buddhist orders. The Buddha agreed, provided Mahāpajāpatī would accept the eight *gurudharma*.[5] Mahāpajāpatī responded 'even so do I, honoured Ānanda, accept these eight important rules never to be transgressed during my life' (Cullavagga, X:354). This constituted her ordination as a *bhikkhunī* and the *bhikkhunī Saṅgha* commenced. The Buddha mentioned to Ānanda that he believed the true *Dhamma* would last for only 500 years now that women were 'going forth' (had women not ordained as *bhikkhunī* then the true *Dhamma* would have endured for 1,000 years) (Cullavagga, X:356).

At some point, the Theravāda order of nuns died out, perhaps as early as the eleventh century in Sri Lanka (Gethin, 1998:91), and the thirteenth century in Burma. According to Barnes

> Inscriptions indicate that there were still *bhikkhunī* in Burma in the year 1279. It was apparently from Burma that the Theravāda *bhikkhu Saṅgha* was introduced to Thailand in the thirteenth century, but the *bhikkhunī Saṅgha* seems never to have been transmitted.
>
> (Barnes, 1996:267)

The women of the order of *mae chi* in Thailand are renunciates but not full *bhikkhunī*. The earliest record of this order can be traced back to the seventeenth century, although they could have existed earlier (Kabilsingh, 1991:36). *Mae chi* shave their head, wear white and undertake to keep the Five or Eight Precepts. The total number of *mae chi* in Thailand 'probably does not much exceed 10,000' (Kabilsingh, 1991:38). It is not hard to discern negative attitudes to women in Thailand; for example, they are considered to be a threat to a monk maintaining his purity. Despite a few exceptions, *mae chi* come from low-income backgrounds and therefore have received limited education. This results not only in their lack of self-confidence but in a general disregard by society. *Mae chi*, unlike monks, are not viewed as an appropriate 'field of merit'. There is, therefore, a lack of financial sponsorship for these women, who often live in their own quarters in temple grounds and carry out domestic chores in return for food and accommodation.

There have been attempts to start an order of *bhikkhunīs* in Thailand but these 'ordained' women have not been recognised by mainstream Buddhism within the kingdom.[6] In 1928, Sara Bhasit and her sister Chongdi were ordained as female novices (*samaneri*). The monk who was suspected of conducting the ceremony was forced to disrobe. Four years later the sisters were ordained as *bhikkhunīs*. As there were no *bhikkhunīs* to ordain them the ceremony was considered invalid. Their practice of wearing saffron robes and referring to themselves as *bhikkhunīs* was considered heretical, and the *Saṅgharat* wrote

to the mayor of Nonthaburi (just outside Bangkok) where they stayed, declaring the sisters' ordination invalid and ordering them to disrobe. Despite a brief period of imprisonment, the sisters continued referring to themselves as *bhikkhunī* for a further two years before disrobing as a result of monastic and public disapproval (Kabilsingh, 1991:45–7).

In 1956, Voramai Kabilsingh requested the Eight Precepts from a respected monk in Bangkok.[7] She wore a light yellow robe to distinguish herself from the *bhikkhu* and *mae chi*. The following year Voramai purchased property close to Bangkok where she established a residence for women and started a variety of projects. Voramai was 'challenged by *Saṅgha* and civil authorities for usurping privileges reserved for the *bhikkhu Saṅgha*' (Barnes, 1996:270). The *mahā thera samakom* investigated the allegations and decided there was no case to answer. In 1971, she received ordination as a *bhikkhunī* in the Chinese *Saṅgha*. This, however, is not recognised by the Thai *Saṅgha*. The struggle to have recognition for *bhikkhuṇī* in Thailand continues, particularly through Voramai Kabilsingh's daughter, Dr Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (Dhammananda *bhikkhuṇī*) who has in recent years ordained as a *bhikkhuṇī* in Sri Lanka.

The Santi Asoke 'nuns' or *sikkhamat* are ordained on the Ten Precepts as are the male novices.[8] A ratio of four monks to every one *sikkhamat* is maintained in the Asoke community. Reasons for this proportional restriction are not stated in public; Heikkilä-Horn (1997:46) concludes that 'allowing the numbers of *sikkhamats* to expand might further infuriate the mainstream monks who do not promote the position of "ordained" women.' One *pa* (female aspirant) clearly indicated that the reason for this ratio was that a woman had more obstacles to overcome to reach a stage of readiness to become a *sikkhamat*, than a man had to become a monk.[9] Women, in her opinion, found it harder to deal with issues such as renouncing possessions, and living in an intense community situation. For her, the path of purification was much more demanding for a female than a male. On the other hand, Thai girls are used to helping their mothers with the domestic chores, such as cooking, cleaning and looking after the younger children. Boys, however, are left to their own devices. It is widely recognised that young males will 'do their own thing' before settling down in their early twenties. There is therefore little point in disciplining a boy. A corollary of this different approach to bringing up children according to gender is that women, because they have been disciplined, can function in a more orderly way than their male counterparts. This is clearly seen in businesses, voluntary organisations and families. One female writer referred to women as 'the kangaroo's tail', meaning that women give stability to Thai society. Thai parents may well hope that their sons will learn discipline in the armed forces should they be conscripted, and/or as monks as they follow the Thai tradition of ordaining for one *phansa* in their early twenties.

The *sikkhamat* enjoys a status considerably much higher than that afforded to the *mae chi*, or even the *dasa sil matavo* of Sri Lanka.[10] The *sikkhamat* is technically on the same level as a novice monk (although they bow to the novices) and the lay members of the Asoke community are expected to pay their respects to

the *sikkhamats* as well as to the monks. The *sikkhamats* perform a variety of important functions such as teaching in the school, Sunday school and groups which may include men. They have responsibility for the female residents of the temples and give counsel to a wide variety of visitors to the Asoke communities. Some of them are fluent in English, French and Chinese dialects and spend part of their time dealing with non-Thai visitors.

Rigorous progression from lay person to samaṇa *and* sikkhamat

The basic level of Santi Asoke membership is seeking to put Asoke principles into practice but not residing in the grounds of a *putthasathan*. Such a person is referred to as a *yatitam*. The following section outlines progression from this stage up to the levels of *samaṇa* and *sikkhamat*. The *samaṇas* decide the advancement of the males, while the *sikkhamats* make decisions regarding the progress of the women; they then bring these decisions to the monks for ratification. The monks do not pose formal questions to the female candidates (Heikkilä-Horn, 1997:197). Sometimes a person will choose to spend more time than is necessary at a particular stage, and may be overtaken by a person who has been in the system for a shorter time. In other situations a person may be asked to remain at a particular level until a deeper level of maturity is evidenced. The following outline of the stages is based on Heikkilä-Horn's (1997:195–7) research and my own interviewing of Asoke members.

Stage One: This is becoming a temporary guest (*akhantuka chon*) at one of the *putthasathans*. Permission is gained from the abbot, and needs to be renewed every seven days. Even at the initial stage of living on a temporary basis in the temple area, a person is required to be a vegetarian and observe the Eight Precepts.[11] Dormitory space is used for females; males may be given some space in one of the temple buildings. During my stays at Pathom Asoke, I slept on a veranda above the main sanctuary (*bot*). I later discovered that this was a privileged place to hang one's mosquito-net (*klot*), as the *samaṇas* used this space during the day for their study and meetings. Normally only senior aspirants sleep in that location. While attending the *Puttha Pisek* ceremony at Sali Asoke, I slept in a field in the temple grounds under a mosquito net (*klot*).

Stage Two: After 3 to 12 months as a temporary temple visitor, a person may apply to become a permanent guest (*akhantuka pracham*). Like a temporary guest, a permanent guest requires to obtain permission every seven days to continue living at the temple.

Stage Three: After a minimum period of 6 months as a permanent guest, a person may apply to become a temple resident *aramik* (male) *aramika* (female). Those who have reached this level will be distinguished by the temple resident badge they are required to wear.

Stage Four: Once a temple resident has stayed at the temple for 18 months he/she may apply to become a *patepat* (abbreviated to *pa*). *Pa* are recognised by the following distinctive items of clothing: males wear brown trousers and shirts,

while the women wear brown sarongs and blouses. *Pa* do not shave their heads but are required to have hair shorter than 10 centimetres.

Stage Five: After being a *pa* for four months (six in the case of a female), it is possible to apply to be a *nak* (male) and *krak* (female). Those who reach this stage shave their heads. The males have a light brown strip on their tunic collars, while on formal occasions the females drape a brown piece of cloth over their left shoulders.

Stage Six: After four months a *nak* can apply to become a novice (*samanutthet*). A *krak* is required to wait for 18 months before she may become a *sikkhamat*. A *sikkhamat is* distinguished by the wearing of a grey piece of cloth over her shoulder.

Stage Seven: A novice (*samanutthet*) may be ordained a monk (*samaṇa*) after a minimum period of four months.

In theory, the quickest in which a male could go from being an outsider to ordination as a *samaṇa* would be three years and three months. In reality, the process takes much longer. The aspirant is under the scrutiny of the community in which he lives, and any of his weaknesses are exposed through rigorous lifestyle and community living. Given the fairly stable nature of Asoke membership, Asoke see no need to expand their current monastic quotient of around 105 *samaṇas* and 25 *sikkhamats*; to do so would be to place an increased burden on the Asoke communities. There is a real sense in which Santi Asoke focus on the quality rather than the quantity of aspirants. As we have seen, Wat Phra Dhammākaya also have high standards for men applying for ordination, and applicants are carefully vetted over a period of time. On the other hand, standards are much less stringent for ordination in mainstream Thai Buddhism. It is not uncommon for a man to be ordained as a *samanera* on the Ten Precepts and later the same day (assuming he is over 20 years of age, and has a reasonable understanding of Buddhism) to be ordained as a *bhikkhu*.

The practice of Buddhist economics **(bun-niyom)**

One of the distinctive features of the Asoke shops is that 'the goods have two prices labelled on them; the original price for which it was purchased and the new price which the shop is selling the goods for. The difference between the prices is extremely low' (Heikkilä-Horn, 1997:122). This is a practice based not on capitalism, but on the Buddhist concept of meritism (Thai *bun-niyom*, Pāli *puññā-niyāma*).[12] According to Bodhirak, 'the belief in *bun-niyom* encourages people to be good, to do good and to help others, so that people will gain more merit (*bun*)'.[13] This practice is seen to lead to a state of contentment where people are happy with what they have, are not attached to material riches, are generous and protect the environment. This is seen by Asokans as standing in contrast to capitalism, where people are attached to material riches, are selfish, competitive and pollute the environment. As Bodhirak comments on the *bun-niyom* approach to economics, 'our loss is our gain' (Heikkilä-Horn, 1997:123). Santi Asoke divides Buddhism into four different categories, depending on whether a person's desires are decreased or increased. The greater

one's desires, the greater the sufferings. The following material is based on Poompanna (1989:20).

Magical Buddhism: Followers of this tradition depend on non-human powers, superstition, charms, fortune telling, sprinkling of holy water etc. This form of Buddhism increases people's desires in life as they seek out practitioners who have special skills, for example, the ability to predict a winning lottery number, or to make a person interested in marrying them. Asokans point out that these ceremonies are not only a hoax but encourage an unhealthy dependence on another person. This kind of Buddhism is very common in Thailand, and is based on an approach which synthesises the use of supernatural power and Buddhism.

Capitalistic Buddhism: This type of Buddhism increases both the desires and the ability to satisfy the desires of the followers. For example, the businessman or banker spends time in meditative practice in order to decrease his stress level and increase his mental powers in order to go out again and exploit society.

Hermetic Buddhism: This decreases both the followers' desires and their ability to satisfy these desires. This type of Buddhism encourages renouncing the world and adopting an ascetic lifestyle like the forest monks. Santi Asoke view this type of Buddhism as being a selfish way for oneself, with no benefits for society.

Fundamental Buddhism: This tradition, according to Asoke may also be described as authentic Buddhism. Followers can decrease their excessive desires and become more industrious. As mainline Buddhism in Thailand functions according to the first three categories, there is, therefore, the need for the emergence of a Buddhism which goes back to basic belief. This then justifies the existence of the Santi Asoke movement.

Buddhism recognises that acquiring wealth is not itself evil, and in general terms we can say that Buddhism takes a middle path between the extremes of poverty and a materialistic acquisition of riches for their own sake (Harvey, 2000:195). Critical issues relate to how riches are acquired, used, and of the owner's attachment to his/her riches. Indeed, reasonable material comfort and economic security should be achieved as a platform for acquiring mental well-being and inner freedom (Payutto, 1994:36). A number of the Buddha's lay disciples were wealthy such as the banker and businessman Anāthapiṇḍika, who constructed the Jetavana monastery at Sāvatthi. In one conversation with him, the Buddha pointed out that there was absolutely nothing wrong with being contented with wealth, providing the wealth was gained lawfully, and shared with others.

> In the case where this enjoyer of sense pleasures seeks after wealth lawfully, not arbitrarily, and in so doing makes himself happy and cheerful, and also shares his wealth with others and does meritorious deeds therewith, and further makes use of it without greed and longing, without infatuation, and is not heedless of the danger or blind to his own salvation – in such a case he is praiseworthy on four counts.
>
> (*Aṅguttara Nikāya*, 1972: Vol 5.181)[14]

'A true Buddhist lay person not only seeks wealth lawfully and spends it for the good, but also enjoys spiritual freedom, not being attached to it, infatuated with or enslaved by that wealth' (Phra Rājavaramuni, 1990:11).[15] Asokans are much more pessimistic about wealth. They view material possessions as potentially dangerous, and the safe position to be in is to renounce everything which is non-essential. This indicates an extension of monastic standards to include laity. This is reflected in other areas of Asoke practice such as lay people eating only one meal per day, living in very basic accommodation and confessing any 'falling short' of the Eight Precepts. One Asoke lay member who comes from a wealthy background even said that giving to others was not a joyful experience. She viewed the receiving of goods by the other as an additional attachment and burden for that person. This, however, contradicts the Buddhist teaching on the joy that comes from giving.

Phra Payutto (1994:34) helpfully distinguishes between the terms *taṇhā* (craving) and *chanda* (desire-to-do, purpose); when *chanda* is focused on benefit for others, it is referred to as *mettā* (loving kindness):

> *Taṇhā* is directed towards feeling; it leads to seeking of objects which pander to self interests and is supported and nourished by ignorance. *Chanda* is directed toward benefit, it leads to effort and action, and is founded on intelligent reflection.

In terms of spiritual practice the Santi Asoke practitioners I have spoken to appear to focus on the elimination of *taṇhā*, as opposed to the development of *chanda*. This may be due to their radical approach to achieving peace without suffering. That is, severing all attachments, be they to relationships or material possessions. Asokans may well respond by saying that their *bun-niyom* approach reflects their world-renouncing ethos and is a vital message to be communicated to the Thai people, who operate on a capitalist or *tun-niyom* (Thai) system.

Some comparisons which may be made between Santi Asoke and some expressions of evangelical Christianity are as follows: a focus on personal salvation, concern for one's own communities, and a proclamation of the method of salvation/ liberation with the invitation to those who show interest to join their particular communities. Both traditions demonstrate a lack of vision in sharing their resources with those who need them the most. Asoke members indicate that they need to experience more liberation from their attachments before they may be of help to the vulnerable in society (such as the street sweepers whom Chamlong served breakfast to). At other times they have said that the best thing anyone can do is discover what causes suffering and then adjust his/her lifestyle accordingly. Clearly Asoke communities offer the perfect supportive/teaching environment for that process. A move away from being caught up in their own communities towards meeting social needs in society at large, for example, children at risk, or the disabled, would not only fulfil a vital need in society but enrich the Asokan spiritual quest, and soften its austere image. Thus Santi Asoke practitioners would

do well to put energy into the cultivation of *chanda* and *mettā*, as well as the elimination of *taṇhā*. This 'self-focused' approach, however, is not unique to Santi Asoke!

One encouraging development involving Santi Asoke in social engagement is its partnership with the Bank for Agriculture and Cooperation. The bank has offered those in debt to them a three-year freeze on their repayments, providing that they undertake training with Santi Asoke. This programme started around May 2002, and necessitates groups attending Asoke monasteries for a five-day course. There is basic *Dhamma* teaching, as well as classes on natural farming (the clients of this bank tend mainly to be farmers) and managing finances. During my visit to Pathom Asoke in August 2002, there was considerable business as the community prepared for an influx of 105 bank customers. The bank was paying Santi Asoke the equivalent of £3.50 per day per person (a considerable sum) to feed and train these farmers. An Asoke trainer would then follow up the clients in their communities to see if the training was being applied to practice. All the Asoke communities (apart from Bangkok) were involved in these training projects, and it has proved to be demanding work. This development is recognition of Asoke's skills in natural farming and disciplined living. The more this sort of recognition occurs, the more the 'excommunicated' Asoke movement is recognised by Thai society as a legitimate expression of Buddhism.

Blurring of some distinctions between Theravāda and Mahāyāna

Asoke de-emphasises some traditional differences between Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism. Of course there is nothing new in the rejection of labels, especially in Buddhism where clinging to a set of beliefs just because they are those of a teacher, or particular group, is considered to be unenlightened practice. Yet this is not just a rejection of labels but a belief that there is valuable teaching in both traditions. Indeed, Bodhirak argues that he is merely trying to bring the good things in both the Mahāyāna and Theravāda traditions together once again by going back to the fundamental teachings and practices of ancient times as he understands them (*Bangkok Post,* 22.7.88). One *sikkhamat* argued that Asoke's return to the origins of Buddhism takes it beyond historical divisions, as the Buddha was neither in the Mahāyāna nor Theravāda tradition.[16] Traditionally Buddhists have not known much about the practice of Buddhism in other schools, often because of considerable geographical separation. In recent times, however, there has been not only an awareness of the different teachings of other schools but a borrowing of concepts. An example of this would be the use Buddhadāsa made of Zen terms and concepts 'to justify a shift of emphasis within Theravāda doctrine' (Jackson, 1988:219). Areas in which distinctions are blurred between traditional Thai and Mahāyāna expressions of Buddhism are vegetarianism, the status of women and to a lesser extent the *Bodhisatta* ideal.

Vegetarianism: The First Precept is 'I undertake the rule of training to abstain from harming living beings' (Harvey, 1990:199). Thus 'it is worse to swat

a fly – an immediate act of killing – than to eat the carcass of an already dead animal' (Harvey, 1998:39). While the killing of animals cannot be right, and to make one's livelihood from such an activity would be a breach of the fifth aspect of the Eight Fold Path, that is, Right Livelihood, the Buddha did not condemn meat-eating. Indeed, he resisted an attempt by his cousin, a monastic by the name of Devadatta, who, in order to create a schism within the *Saṅgha* 'proposed to the Buddha that all monks should be vegetarian and follow a number of previously optional ascetic practices such as living at the root of a tree' (Harvey, 2000:160). Vegetarianism was practised by the Jains and other individuals during the time of the Buddha (484–404 BCE). The Buddha rejected ascetic practice, taking a middle path between excessive rigour and indulgence (both of which he proved to be counterproductive). He permitted the eating of allowable meat by monks provided they had not seen, heard or suspected that the animal had been killed especially for them (Harvey, 2000:159).[17] To have a fairly restricted diet may be viewed as being in bondage to a particular kind of food, and may make it onerous for lay people to provide for the monastic. Nevertheless, Asoke monks and *sikkhamats* who follow them on alms rounds politely refuse to receive non-vegetarian food, and those who wish to support the Asoke community subsequently adjust their offering.

There are several terms in the Thai language used to describe vegetarianism. '*Jay*' is a Chinese word used by both Chinese and Thai to describe abstinence from eating meat for religious reasons. '*Mangsawerat*' is a Thai word which is used to describe a person who 'skips' eating meat (including fish), it has no religious nuance. '*Mi gin sat*' (not eating animals), or '*mi gin neua*' (not eating meat) are other synonyms used for vegetarianism. There is no word in the Thai vocabulary for vegan, although Asoke practice is to refrain from eating any form of animal products. Asoke members use *mangsawerat*, and they consider eating meat in any form to be a breach of the First Precept. This was not the position in non-Mahāyana ancient Indian Buddhism and is not normal in the Theravāda tradition. In the Thai context, vegetarianism is practised by a few devout mainstream Buddhists on holy days (*wan phra*). Such people normally also observe the Eight Precepts on such occasions. This may appear to be a more rigorous interpretation of the First Precept for a holy day but it is also related to ascetic practice, and is sometimes accompanied by eating two instead of three meals per day.

In Question 2 of my questionnaire, 'What is the most important practice you engage in to progress and achieve *nibbāna*?' 37.1 per cent of responders cited a vegetarian (or more accurately a vegan) diet. For a further 16 per cent of the responders, their cited main practice of keeping the Precepts would include vegetarianism. All Asokans would view the First Precept (I undertake a rule of training to abstain from harming living beings) as implying a vegetarian diet. Not everyone who cited the importance of a vegetarian diet went on to mention its advantages. Stated benefits of a vegetarian lifestyle tended to focus on issues such as: increased mental purity and a desire to demonstrate compassion to animals and humans.

During my time at the *Puttha Pisek* retreat of 2001, a number of the older men indicated their regret to me that they had killed animals for both food and sport in their younger days. One man who lost an arm indicated it was his *karmic* fruit for killing birds in his youth. Bodhirak has said that the most meritorious occupation is that of preparing and serving of vegetarian food, as this does away with the killing of animals.[18] It also facilitates the eating of vegetarian food which is viewed as a skillful deed. Indeed, one of the first questions an Asoke member will ask of an outsider is 'Do you eat meat?' As I am a vegetarian, I am not sure what the Asoke response would be to a non-vegetarian. In my case they wanted to know how long I had been a vegetarian, why I had given up eating meat, and if there were many in my country who were also vegetarian.

Many Thai who come into contact with Asokans would identify with Harvey's (1998:40) comment 'feelings of moral superiority is a common danger among vegetarians'. The practice of vegetarianism on holy days is viewed as meritorious by Thai but it is viewed as extreme if it is one's permanent practice. The Thai dislike extreme forms of behaviour, even religious behaviour. Thus Santi Asoke is viewed as an extreme movement with unnecessarily high standards. On the other hand, Asoke members consider meat eaters to be in breach of the First Precept, and indicative of a low attainment of *paññā* and *silā*. This rigorous interpretation of the First Precept may be viewed as more at home in Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism (Harvey, 2000:163) than the Thai Theravāda tradition.

Status of women: We have already noted how the *bhikkhunī* order is extant in Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism, yet has not existed in the Theravāda tradition for some eight centuries. While Santi Asoke have not sought to reintroduce a *bhikkhunī* order within their movement, they have considerably enhanced the status of women by ordaining suitable female aspirants on the Ten Precepts. The *sikkhimats* are de facto *bhikkhunīs* in the regard in which they are held, and in their teaching and leadership roles within the Asoke communities. An attempt to go one small step further and try to reinstate the *bhikkhunī* order would bring the movement under the monastic spotlight once again, resulting in the disruption of what have become well-ordered communities.

Use of the *Bodhisatta* ideal (Sanskrit *Bodhisattva*): There is the idea that the king is a *Bodhisatta* in Thai society, drawing to some extent on 'Brahmanical ideas of the *deva-raja* or 'god-king' which surrounded the Siamese monarchy in the Ayutthaya period and whose echoes persist to the present day' (Jackson, 2000:266). King Chulalongkorn (Rama IV) and King Bumibhon (Rama IX, the present monarch) are particularly held in high regard. King Chulalongkorn who passed away in 1910, still lives on in the minds of many Thai and is seen as ready to help them through his charisma and moral goodness (*pāramī*). The placing of trust in the *Bodhisatta* is present in the Thai Theravāda tradition. We have mentioned the Brahmanic influence but perhaps Mahāyāna practice mediated through the Chinese population has had a greater influence,

for example, the Sino-Thai cult of Kuan Im as a goddess (*Bodhisatta*) of protection and help.[19] Moving on, however, to the application of the *Bodhisatta* ideal we have the example of Thai academic Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (who, as we have seen, has taken ordination as a *bhikkhuṇī* in Sri Lanka and is now known as Dhammananda *Bhikkhuṇī*). She states 'I want to be enlightened only because once I'm enlightened, I would have much more capacity to help others, to help all sentient beings. This kind of conviction must be very strong in order to lead you to action' (Leach, 1994).

The Santi Asoke leader goes much further than Chatsumarn's statement of intent. One informant told me that several years ago Bodhirak had suggested that the world was at the mid-point between the *parinibbāna* of the historical Buddha Gotama and the arrival of Metteyya Buddha, and such a period would be marked by the coming of a great *Bodhisatta*.[20] This being would be identified by his success in bringing the following, through his teaching, to their respective levels of enlightenment – 9 *Arahats*, 90 Non-returners, 900 Once-returners and 9,000 Stream-enterers. Bodhirak encouraged his followers to strive for the highest level of enlightenment possible to them, to see if he was the great *Bodhisatta* of the mid-point between the historical Buddha and Metteyya. Although there does not currently appear to be any mention of this, there is a belief that some members consider their leader to be a *Bodhisatta*.

In Question 6 of the questionnaire, 'What attracted you to become a member of this movement?' two responded as follows: 'Bodhirak is an *Arahat* and *Bodhisatta*. He brings the teaching of the Buddha to practice and uses it in the right way.' Also, 'I saw a *Bodhisatta* in my meditation, and therefore searched for one.'

In a mass ceremony in India in October 1956, Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956) and around 500,000 scheduled caste members converted to Buddhism in a mass ceremony (Gomez, 1989:99). It is interesting to note that while the Ambedkarite movement is in the Theravāda tradition, they regard Dr Ambedkar as a *Bodhisatta* (Harvey, 1990:299). Although Dr Ambedkar did not claim to be a *Bodhisatta*, he is regarded both as a *Bodhisatta* and an *Arahat* by his followers.[21] Santi Asoke is not unique in making the *Bodhisatta* ideal more central within the Theravāda tradition. It is nevertheless worth noting that their justification for using the concept rests 'on their being no Theravāda or Mahāyāna during the time of the Buddha'.

Six outside (*etic*) perspectives on Santi Asoke

Santi Asoke – a fundamentalist movement?

Swearer and Keyes, two specialists in the Thai socio-religious context, both view Santi Asoke as a fundamentalist movement. Swearer writes 'it strives to strip away the "chaff" and return to the "fundamentals", or essence of Buddhism, a moral and religious transformation which does not rely upon, and rejects as superfluous, the usual magical and merit-making rituals' (Swearer, 1991:668).

He (1991:678) goes on to cite what he views as the distinctive features of fundamentalism in the Theravāda context. They include:

- Being lead by strong, charismatic leaders;
- Followers who perceive themselves to be under some kind of threat;
- The movement will have an obsessive sense of its unique role or destiny and have anti-rationalist, anti-intellectual, and even anti-ritualistic tendencies;
- The tendency to stress the value of direct experience coupled with plain and simple religious practice.

The above criteria fit the Asoke situation apart from the anti-rationalist approach. Asoke take a very rationalist approach and value the practical and logical practices and beliefs.

Charles Keyes notes ‘The Santi Asoke sect, with its religious centre on the outskirts of Bangkok, most closely fits the fundamentalist mould of any of the movements in contemporary Thailand’ (Keyes, 1991:395). Santi Asoke is a reaction against the state *Saṅgha* but the direction of change is back to the Buddhism which was taught and practised by the Buddha (as understood by the Asoke movement). The relatively high value given to the *sikkhimats*, the stripping away of superstitious practice and the removal of fraternity labels all indicate a fundamentalist, or ‘back to the basics’ Buddhist movement. What some would see as missing in the fundamentalist criteria is a focus on scripture – a key feature of King Mongkut’s reforms which lead to the establishment of the Thammayut order. Bodhirak is not a text-based monk and believes that his understanding of doctrine comes from his high level of insight, not from his study of scripture. One former Asoke member informed me that Bodhirak got his ideas and then checked out that they were in keeping with the scriptures.[22]

Santi Asoke – a millenarian movement?

Heikkilä-Horn understands fundamentalism to be a vague and inadequate term. She (1997:207) moots the possibility that Santi Asoke has some similarities with the millenarian movements that occurred in North-East Thailand, which were discussed in Chapter 3.

We have already seen that the Santi Asoke community has been marginalised by the Thai *Saṅgha*. It may also be said that Asoke is a reaction of the lower middle class against the gate keepers of Thai society. This may be described in general terms as the quest of many individuals seeking one form of ‘fair-play’ or another. We also note that Asoke communities have established a new order based on high moral standards, strict ascetic practice, vegetarianism and *bun niyom* economics. Asoke culture stands in sharp contrast to the prevailing materialistic and hedonistic attitudes of Thai throughout the kingdom. These utopian communities express the nature of Asoke – ‘peace without suffering’ through the practice of non-attachment. Community members are open to those who wish to learn to

live like them, and who will commit to keeping the Five or Eight Precepts. Part of Santi Asoke's purpose is to be present to an increasingly Westernised, globalised, Buddhist-value rejecting society, as an example of how an ideal Buddhist society should function. Clearly in this regard Asoke can be viewed as prophetic.

Bodhirak is viewed as a person with a great amount of merit, a highly enlightened monk, who, in a Buddhist world which has lost its way, is considered by his followers to be *the* true teacher of Buddhism.[23] In terms of moral power and accumulation of merit, Bodhirak easily qualifies as a *phu mi bun* in the Santi Asoke context. He would not, however, be viewed as a *phu wiset*, a person who performs miraculous deeds; this would be incongruent with his status as a monk, and not in keeping with the highly rationalistic Asoke belief system. This, however, need not invalidate Heikkilä-Horn's suggestion that Santi Asoke is a millenarian movement.

In Santi Asoke, a magic-renouncing, rationalistic system with a strong focus on moral purity, potential followers will not be impacted by miraculous signs but by moral power. A sign of corporate high moral standards and absence of suffering is presented to any visitor to an Asoke community. If such a visitor is seeking peace and contentment, or looking for a place where religious practice is encouraged, then the visit will make a powerful impact. The explanation of this experience will both contain reference both to the ability of Bodhirak to teach truths not currently taught in Buddhism, and to the function of Asoke communities to provide teaching and support which will result in 'peace without suffering'. A rejection of former thinking and lifestyle will take place if the person associates with Santi Asoke.

The high-profile nature of Asoke's missionary encounter with society and polemic approach to the *Saṅgha* have modified since the movement's excommunication from the *Saṅgha*. Asoke communities now function as model communities where mainstream monks and lay people from every tradition are free to come and observe Asoke belief and practice. A move then is clearly discernible from the former high-profile engagement with a world needing to be changed (at least in Santi Asoke's opinion), to a low-key example of a particular form of Buddhist practice for those who wish to visit Asoke communities.

Asoke is, of course, based on the *putthasathan*. The 'pull in toward a holy refuge' is only natural for religious communities of a monastic nature. With the development of schools, cottage industries, farms and orchards, all necessary parts to a self-sustaining community, there is much less time available for mission outside of the *putthasathan*. Indeed, to understand Santi Asoke teaching and practice one needs to visit one of the communities, and observe its members in their normal activities of working and eating. One reason for this is that much of Asoke teaching is related to the practice of austerity in every area of life and performing all activities with a high level of mindfulness.

Millenarians tend to believe that a new day will soon dawn for them. Keyes (1977:283) makes this point when he writes that millenarianism 'is distinguished from other eschatological belief systems in that the millennium is believed

to be imminent'. This is not the case with Santi Asoke. They are taking a 'long-haul' approach. This is evidenced by discussion of new leadership of the movement after Bodhirak passes away. Members talk about the slow nature of helping urban Thai gain *Dhamma*-based perspectives on issues such as economics, caring for the environment, vegetarianism and other forms of selfless living. Indeed, Bodhirak believes[24] that it will take 500 years of Asoke example before Thailand will produce only what is needed, and where there is governance informed by *Dhamma* principles.[25]

While Asokans highly value Bodhirak's leadership and level of spiritual attainment. they clearly recognise that their leader is unable to liberate them from their suffering. One lady who had involvement with several different Buddhist fraternities, including a time as treasurer at Wat Phra Dhammakāya, disagreed with my suggestion that Santi Asoke was a millenarian movement.[26] This was based on the view that Asoke members believe that liberation comes through self-effort, rather than the effort or merit of the leader. The key quality of Bodhirak, according to the interviewee, was his ability to set out the right path to liberation, as opposed to other teachers. This was confirmed by a conversation with another committed member, who in response to a question about Bodhirak's level of enlightenment expressed disinterest.[27] He went on to say that the important issue for him was that the teaching of Bodhirak had enabled him to cope with the disappointments he had experienced over the past 30 years.

The movement's understanding of Bodhirak being a teacher rather than a saviour, their long-term commitment to modelling the *Dhamma*, and the disinterest in material gain indicate that Santi Asoke is not a millenarian movement.

Santi Asoke – a Buddhist version of Christian 'base communities'?

Basic Christian communities, known as *base communities* first appeared in Brazil but very quickly spread throughout Roman Catholic Latin America in the early 1960s.[28] They subsequently spread much further afield and may now be viewed as an aspect of Roman Catholic church life. Their inception and development took place during what is known as the 'Decade of Development' in Latin America. 'It was a time of great economic progress and enormous social vitality, particularly on the popular level' (Boff, 1991:174), which translated into the development of trade unionism and community organisations. Even when economic growth tailed off and democracies were replaced by military juntas in some countries, base communities continued to expand. One of their distinctives was the study of the bible and application to the 'here and now' of the base community and its context. The shortage of priests available for ministry necessitated the participation of lay people in religious leadership and is posited as one of the major reasons for the emergence of base communities. While this is true, the quest for meaningful relationships in a Christian context, and the desire to participate in determining what affected them are two other motives for the development of base communities.

Base communities which developed in the context of military governments and economic hardship were often support structures for their members during these

difficult times. They created opportunities to think communally and theologically as to how their situation could be changed, and how they as individuals and communities could develop spiritually. The base communities provided a locus for the discussion and 'doing' of liberation theology.[29] The results of these reflections have been documented and used to demonstrate how communities may reflect on and apply the bible to praxis.

The Asoke communities put into practice the teachings of Bodhirak. This leads to new approaches to economics, crop management and children's education. Base and Santi Asoke communities have visitors who come to learn and possibly apply lessons to their own situations. One Roman Catholic priest discusses the self-belief and affirmation that is brought to base-community members as outsiders come to ask questions and learn from them. The marginalised who are unsure and do not speak well 'begin to take on themselves the attributes of the prophet and teacher that Paul talked about so much' (Hebblethwaite, 1993:124). The same phenomenon is to be observed in the Asoke traditions as mainstream monks, Roman Catholic priests and laity, as well as academic researchers visit and seek an understanding of the movement.

Santi Asoke emerged during a period of considerable flux in Thai society. The anti-government protests of 1973, despite the appalling crackdown from the military, legitimised protest against the status quo. Bodhirak's non-compliance with the *Saṅgha's* edicts must be seen as both a protest against hierarchical structures of the *Saṅgha* (and by association the establishment), and the quest to exercise his own independent nature. Some of the attractions which Asoke communities hold out to their members are similar to those of base communities. They include: the moving away from an ecclesiastical and centrally controlled hierarchy (Roman Catholicism or state-regulated Buddhism) to a flattened form of hierarchy which encourages the involvement of each member of the community. There is also the move away from *societies* which are not supportive of the development of spiritual purity to *communities* who encourage spiritual development.

Margaret Hebblethwaite (1993:109) notes that one of the base community's tasks is to influence people away from 'the materialism of imitating the richest culture in the world, towards a sense of pride in being one of God's beloved people.' Santi Asoke seeks to bring Thai people back from individualistic, materialistic lifestyles to a possession-renouncing community approach based on Buddhist principles. One would expect Bodhirak to endorse Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff's comment

> When it comes to identifying the causes of the miseries they suffer, the members of the basic communities see the main one – not the only one, but the main one as the capitalist system. But worse than the system itself, is its individual spirit of accumulation, its social irresponsibility, and its insensitivity toward human beings, who are treated as 'manpower' to be sold at auction.
>
> (Boff, 1992:42)

In both base and Asoke communities, women enjoy a status and leadership role not afforded to them in the mainstream traditions. This progressiveness does not lead to women being ordained as priests in the Roman Catholic tradition, nor can it be expected to. To date, the *sikkhamats* have the same status as the novice monks yet, as already discussed, it is unlikely that an attempt will be made to reinstate the *bhikkihunī* order within the Asoke movement.

An obvious difference between the Catholic base communities and Asoke communities is the source of understanding. The base communities draw wisdom from reflection on the bible and its engagement with their context; it is both deductive and inductive. In the Asoke tradition, as we shall see in the next chapter, belief is based on insight which arises from high levels of concentration which result from carrying out activities with intense mindfulness. The teachings of Bodhirak are considered definitive. He is an extremely able communicator, inspiring leader and prolific author and is respected as having a high level of enlightenment. The insights of Asoke members are seen to confirm the teachings of their leader.

Another clear difference is that base-community members continue to live in their own homes but meet together to study and work together for the community. In this regard it may seem more appropriate to compare Santi Asoke with Indian *ashrams*. The *ashram* in its Hindu religious context is a place in which the austere life is practised for spiritual purposes.[30] On the other hand, non-temple residents (*yatitham*) associated with Asoke, especially in Bangkok and Nakhorn Pathom, may choose to live in close proximity to the centre. They retain their secular jobs but join in aspects of community life either in the evening or at the weekend.

Thai religious studies specialist, Tavivat Puntarigvivat (1998) points out how the Buddha was not concerned 'with political liberation from social conditions, but personal liberation from psychological suffering arising from the cycle of birth, old age, sickness and death'. Dr Tavivat calls for social engagement based on the Five Precepts which works towards the socio-political liberation of society, and encourages *base communities* to increasingly work towards that end. He points to a number of socially engaged Buddhist communities, and refers to them as Buddhist *base communities* in Thailand.[31] Interestingly he makes no mention of Santi Asoke, a movement of which he is well aware.

Santi Asoke – a 'community culture' movement?

There is a resonance between Asoke communities and the approaches taken by the *community culture* school of thought (*wathanatham chumchon*) which has emerged over the last 20 years, or so. Two of the forces which shaped this movement are the increase of international aid through Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and the increased Roman Catholic positive regard for working with local cultures/communities since the Second Vatican Council (1962–65). One of the most influential thinkers in the *community culture* movement is Father Niphot Thianwihan. After ordination as a priest in 1975, he worked with the Karen, a tribal group in the north of the kingdom. At the same time he

was director of the Centre of Social Development of the Catholic Council of Thailand (CCTD).

The *community culture* school of thought maintains that each community has its own value system and culture. The care demonstrated by this community culture shows the importance it places on harmony within the community, as well as the value it places on human beings. The common ancestors are the link between present and past members of the community. Strong community culture means that the community (village) can organise itself into various activities and resist external exploitation. Community culture remains intact (despite developmental changes) because its activities have been turned into rituals. Anyone who causes disharmony within a village should be viewed as engaging in sinful behaviour (according to *community culture* thought) as disharmony can lead to the breakdown of community culture and the undermining of village life. Those within the *community culture* school of thought maintain that it is crucial to understand the dynamics of the culture of a community in order to work with those who are key players and energisers of the community. Father Niphot Thianwihan considers religion to be the essence of the community culture as it explains various values and is the ideology and standpoint of the community. Development workers may aid communities by helping them discover the reasons behind their practices and the origins of their rituals. This heightened consciousness of their own situation assists community members to recover their 'real' consciousness which helps them not to take on a 'false' consciousness which really belongs to outsiders.

This high view of *community culture* among Roman Catholic thinkers may be due to the belief that eternal salvation may be obtained by community members maintaining the standards of their particular community. Those who behave well according to their own belief system may be judged righteous by God regardless of the religious orientation of their community. Community culture is thus elevated to a level which approximates the moral standards within Christianity.[32] A corollary of this view for the Roman Catholic Church is adjusting its practice to that of the community culture in which it is placed. Thus the Second Conference of Asian Bishops, which met in Calcutta in 1978, agreed 'The Church should try to maintain and promote local culture, successfully complete God's work with these people, through their natural culture, even before they have a chance to hear the word of Christ (Nartsupha, 1991:127).

Just as Father Niphot Thianwihan has developed *community culture* from a Christian perspective, so Buddhist social scientists have brought a Buddhist perspective to the same school. Prawet Wasi is a good example of such a thinker.[33] Nartsupha (1991:121–5) points out three distinctives of Prawet Wasi's interpretation of *community culture*. First, it is anti-state. The state 'is a power-centralised system, giving out commands vertically'. This bureaucratic system discourages the participation of ordinary people as almost everything has to be first officially approved. Prawet advocates a handing over of power to the communities to make the decisions that affect them. Some Asoke members have suffered at the hands

of corrupt government officials, yet the movement, while against corruption, and egalitarian in its own ethos, may not be described as anti-state. There is the official flag-raising ceremony and singing of the national anthem each morning for the teachers and school children.

Second, there is an emphasis on the promotion of community. Rural communities, according to Prawet, should possess the following five qualities which he refers to as Five Aggregates. He describes them as

- Righteousness, diligence and solitude;
- A subsistence mode of production of integrated agriculture;
- A balance with the natural environment;
- Economic self-reliance and the eradication of external dependence;
- Communal life, the institutions of family and Buddhist temple *wat*, and also a communal culture of mutual aid.

(Nartsupha, 1991:124)

Third, development must improve both the peoples' spirit and the environment. Religious principles must therefore be applied in development work. Without a 'moral and ethical base, there can be no real development for the people'.[34] Prawet views Buddhism not as a state-religion but the religion which guards Buddhist harmony. Empowered by Buddhist practice, villagers will be able to resist the state, greed, selfishness and exploitation, 'which are products of a capitalist way of development'. Whereas Father Niphot views God at work in all that is good in the Buddhist value system, Professor Prawet seeks to introduce Buddhist thought and practice to create a moral community (Nartsupha, 1991:124–6).

Opponents of *community culture* flag up the harsh realities of much of community living, and cite examples of people with influence exploiting those with less influence, and behaving in a selfish way rather than pursuing the common good. The empowering and equipping of local communities is viewed by such people as 'a conservative force, promoted by utopians and conservative nationals, which threatens the march of progress and may even damage what urban modernism has achieved' (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2000:211).

Community culture received a boost as a result of King Bhumibol's 1997 birthday speech which was delivered on television.[35] 'The speech linked the [economic] crisis, the principle of self-sufficiency, and the idea of going back to a simpler economy' (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2000:194). Asoke members viewed the speech as justifying their long-standing, self-sufficient, community approach.

It appears that as the Asoke communities developed from their inception in 1970s, *community culture* ideas were applied. Common features are discernible such as relying on the use of physical labour, self-reliance of the communities, a high regard for the natural environment, and a reaction against globalisation which serves multinational corporations and those who support them and erodes a traditional value system in the process. How much of Asoke's practice was shaped by the existing models of 'community thought'? McCargo (1997:77)

points out that Prawet Wasi has written very favourably on Santi Asoke, viewing it as 'a viable model for Buddhist community development'. On the other hand, Pongpaichit and Baker's (2000:193–216) comprehensive section on the community-culture movement makes no reference to the Asoke movement. None of the Santi Asoke members to whom I spoke seemed to be aware of the *community culture* school, and indicated that the concept of living together as Buddhist communities was Bodhirak's idea. One former member indicated that in the early days of the movement, Bodhirak used to sometimes talk about Gandhi and his *ashram*, as well as the *kibbutz* programme in Israel. Indeed, there are comparisons between Asoke's ascetic communities and Gandhi's *ashram*. One example is the former Asoke practice of refraining from talking for one day a week.[36] This mimics one of the distinctive features of Gandhi's approach to community life.

Santi Asoke – a utopian society reminiscent of a previous generation?

Santi Asoke members walk around barefoot and non-monastics wear peasant dress (unchanged in style for many decades, perhaps centuries). This, coupled with the use of basic equipment for farming and cottage industries creates an old-fashioned, rural ambience. Is Thai sociologist Tavivat Puntarigvivat correct, however, in describing Santi Asoke as a 'retro'-utopian movement?

The central issue of utopia, a term coming either from *eu-topos* (Greek word for 'good place'), or *ou-topos* (Greek word for 'no place') is a good and just society brought about by social order. Utopianism may be applied to a variety of ideologies which either idealise a period in the past (*retro*-utopianism) or look forward to a future period which will be perfect, (as opposed to the present).[37] An example of the former in the Christian context is the perfection of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and the intimacy they enjoyed with God. The rule of Christ on earth at some point in the future, possibly after a period of intense persecution, is an example of the latter. This, however, would be termed millenarianism. Indeed, utopian thought is often to be found in millenarian movements, such as cargo cults or other New Religious Movements. Utopian communities have enjoyed success from time to time, especially in America – a land of freedom, and new beginnings. Many had a religious bias such as those established by the Mennonites in the 1600s and by the Shakers in the 1700s. They 'were attempts to manifest the laws of heaven on earth' and to some extent were a reaction to 'the country's strong tradition of individualism' (Rohmann, 2000:419).

While Thai have strong commitments to their families and in many cases to their seniors at work, Mulder (1992:111) observes

> There appears to be hardly any conception of an overall order of society to which individuals should submit themselves. Consequently the Thai concept of ethics is, like the Buddhist concept, individual centred: people are not responsible for either their society or their fellow-man but merely for themselves and their social self expression.

It may well be that just as the Mennonites and Shakers reacted against the excessive individualism of the America of their time, so Asoke is reacting against the selfish individualism of contemporary Thailand. It does so through the creation of mini-societies where there is accountability, commonality and the working together for the spiritual development of one and all. These mini-communities hold out examples for Thai society to emulate, and Santi Asoke's regard for society may be seen in slogans such as 'eat little, use little, work a lot, and save the rest for society' (Schober, 1995:321).

Burrell and Dale (2002:108) sum up six features which utopian-based movements have in common as they endeavour to secure organisation and structure for their communities. They are mentioned with some brief comments about Santi Asoke and serve to support the idea that Asoke is a utopian movement.

- Protection: utopia offers the spiritual, political, physical and moral protection of the community around its membership. Asokan practice reflects this as its members are offered protection in these areas. An example of this is the strong focus of Santi Asoke on using natural remedies and providing health care at each of its centres;
- Boundaries: utopias have strong demarcations between utopian and non-utopian , or dystopian areas. Asoke communities have their sanctuary central to their communities, and temple dwellers obviously reside on temple (*putthasathan*) land. Non-temple dwellers (*yatitham*) like to live as close to the temple as possible and will either rent or buy property nearby. Asoke *samaṇa* and *sikkhamat*, are distinguished from mainstream monks and *mae chi* by the wearing of different coloured robes. Lay members of Asoke are identified through the wearing of traditional 'farmer-style' clothes;
- The 'beastliness' of the outside and the 'bestliness' of the inside: The idea here is that utopian communities contain within their boundaries all that is worthy of nurture, and exclude all that is beastly in the world of nature. In Asoke's case this is literally true, as nature is cultivated by low-cost, community-produced organic fertilisers. Asoke followers campaign against the use of pesticides which they claim is unnecessary and harmful to humans and the environment;
- Control: utopian thought does not usually speak of 'control' but rather of 'harmony.' The aim is that harmony and control need to be in place to prevent individuals threatening harmony. Rigorous self-discipline and the practice of 'the view of the group'(Thai *mu klum*) serve as an important corrective to the disturbing of the movement's harmony.[38] A lot of straight talking takes place concerning spiritual development and conformity to the system. Senior members admonish their juniors with the words *khat klao* (Thai) meaning 'polish it, or make it better' – a call to increased effort;
- Patterns: utopian existence is often meant to follow predetermined patterns of behaviour that have been laid down before the community is even settled. Santi Asoke, as we have seen, takes seriously the view of the group.

Indeed, policy making and decision taking in Asoke communities is done through elected communities. Hierarchy is considerably flattened, and there is a strong focus on the natural development of projects according to the desires and resources of members.

- Formality: utopian thought often follows the notion that jurisprudence is important to the community and lays down rules which are meant to be formal, objective and understood by all. This issue is discussed in the next section. While law and regulation are important in Asokan communities, there is also creativity in whatever is done and a willingness to listen to the majority which circumvents inflexibility.

McLeish and O'Leary (1993:769) makes the point that 'ascetic' utopians are making a comeback in post-industrial thought and goes on to mention the utopian approach of banishing a practice and reintroducing an alternative that will be to the ultimate benefit of everyone. In the Asoke case a Buddhist approach to economics (*bun-niyom*) replaces capitalism (*thun-niyom*).

If one looks at the dress code of Asoke lay members and their carrying out of basic farming and selling tasks, then one could easily conclude that they were a *retro*-utopian group. Yet one has to be aware of one *sikkhamat*'s warning 'don't compare us to the Amish, that would be to misunderstand us'.[39] Bodhirak's penchant for art and design influences the approach taken by the movement to communicate the message. Computer graphics and latest photography and sound-recording equipment are part of Asoke life. While the traditional farmers' image of caring for and living off the land capture much of Asoke's anti-consumer, anti-Western, value system there is also a focus on the transformation of society's values. Despite the Buddha's prediction that morality will decrease until knowledge of his teaching will be lost to mankind and reintroduced by Metteyya, the next Buddha; Asokans believe that they can gradually transform Thai society until its practice is based on the *Dhamma*. Santi Asoke's form of utopia may thus be described as 'ascetic but prophetic' as it seeks, through example, to call people back to a life-style informed by the Buddhist principles of simplicity and non-grasping.

Santi Asoke – an excessively legalistic movement?

Check Sin is the term introduced at the end of section four on 'Inside Understandings of Santi Asoke'. This practice involves the filling in of a booklet entitled 'The [Eight] Precepts Check Book'.[40] Temple residents and permanent guests are required to submit the booklets to their spiritual advisers each week, after the daily completion of the fill-in sections. Heikkilä-Horn (1997:199) points out that male practitioners take their booklets to a *samaṇa* while female practitioners have the option of presenting theirs either to a *samaṇa* or *sikkhamat*; they cannot, however, be forced to show their booklets to a *samaṇa*. The purpose of the booklet is to facilitate the lay practitioner in understanding and improving

his/her everyday behavior. This is brought about by the recording of occasions when the precepts were broken, reflection on practice and discussion with the spiritual mentor regarding a specific strategy for improvement. The Asokans I spoke to viewed this accountability structure positively and indicated appreciation for the helpful advice given by the *samaṇa* or *sikkhamat*.

The Eight Precepts' Check Book commences with the following verse:

> Life is like a little boat on a big sea
> Where stormy seas are always ready to drown you
> If you have not reached the other shore your boat will be pitching about
> There is only one way to sort this out and reach your destination
> So stop sailing around in a circle in the ocean.

This then is a call to daily examine how one has kept the Eight Precepts; and the second page goes on to say:

> Check the precepts everyday for *Arahatship* is not far [from you]
> If you have real merit there is no need to regret your actions
> Righteous men give praises and a good reputation spread out to be an example to others
> Away from evil – so stand firm in the *Dhamma*.

Each of the Eight Precepts begins with a statement of its purpose, for example, the First Precept is to decrease and stop anger. The check book then lists five levels of achievement in keeping the precept. Continuing with the first precept we note these levels as follows:

1 The precept is *torn* (*kat*) when an animal is killed on purpose, or anger is expressed through kicking a dog or hitting a cat.
2 The precept is *penetrated* (*talu*) when one deliberately speaks angrily, or orders a killing or attack on someone. Another example cited is to ridicule someone.
3 The precept is *stained* (*dang*) when the practitioner is angry, or holds a grudge.
4 The precept is *tainted* (*roy*) when one is discouraged and views the world as 'grey'.
5 We are free through the [keeping of the] precept (*ben thai*). At this stage the practitioner will observe only mercy arising in his/her heart; there will be no form of anger.

An example of how the law (precept) is awarded elevated status may be viewed in Asoke practice of the Sixth Precept, the avoidance of 'eating at an unreasonable time'. In the Theravāda context this is understood to be not eating solids after noon. The booklet reminds practitioners that the purpose of the Sixth Precept

is to decrease the practitioner's addiction to food and to eat moderately. It is interesting to note:

1 The precept is *torn* when more than one meal per day is eaten, or more than two meals for someone who has a less-rigorous standard because he/she is less advanced.
2 The precept is *penetrated* when the practitioner asks for his/her favourite food.
3 The precept is *stained* when the taste and smell of the favourite food is imagined or desired for.
4 The precept is *tainted* when one is happy to see, or receive food.
5 One is freed through the keeping of the precept when there is no desire for food.

It may be argued that there is a parallel between Santi Asoke's relationship to Buddhism and the Pharisees' (and also the Essenes') relationship to Judaism. While the research of Neuserner and Rivkin (Mason, 2000:783) question the position and prestige afforded to the Pharisee by traditional scholarship, it is clear that this fraternity had a deep attachment to the religious legal code. In order to be sure of not breaking any of God's laws, the Pharisees developed complex behavioural codes. Religious and social life orbited around Pharisaic regulations, and there was a certain pride in strict religious observance. In the Asoke movement we see love for the *Dhamma* as well as an extremely rigorous interpretation of the precepts which contain additions which when applied serve to obliterate attachments.

While zealous, this extremely ascetic approach seems somewhat closer to the spiritual path the Buddha rejected, rather than the Middle-Way he taught. Like the Pharisees, Asokans can be proud of their superior achievements (compared to the perceived laxities of nominal mainstream Thai Buddhists). The fulfillment of these regulations, while reducing attachments, also serve to enhance a practitioner's status within the Asoke communities. Admission to higher orders such as from *pa* to *nak* or *krak* is decided on such performance. Failure, even in what we would view as fairly minor areas, for example, drinking a Coke, can lead to discouragement. A former member of the movement indicated that excessive criticism of practitioners in these areas was detrimental to their development, serving only to make them feel excessively guilty.[41] He went on to indicate that he considered the movement to be excessively rigorous, and that some who successfully kept the regulations felt proud of their achievements. Such members, then, may be in danger of being bound by the spiritual fetter of *sīlabbota-paromāsa* 'clinging to virtues and vows'. On the other hand, those who feel they are underachieving may feel demoralized.

Use of typologies to classify Santi Asoke

Glock and Stark's 'Deprivation model'

Refusal of people (who have subsequently become members of Asoke) to co-operate in corrupt work practice has led in some cases to intimidation, both

emotional and physical. In these, and less extreme cases, people have experienced a marked discrepancy between their own moral standards and those of society in general. This 'inability to lead their lives according to their own lights' (Glock and Stark, 1965:248) and persecution by society because of their religious convictions creates 'ethical deprivation'. Living together with like-minded people, or at least having supportive friends has been a strong motivating factor for a good number to join Santi Asoke. For members, mutual accountability and the will of the group (*mu glum*), provide security in a way that the lack of accountability and excessive individualism of society fails to do.

Bryan Wilson's typology

A number of Asoke distinctives may be observed in Wilson's explanation of 'introversionist'.

> The sect develops a particular *Weltanschauung* and considers itself an enlightened elect; inner values may be regarded as incommunicable and eschatological ideas are unarticulated or of little significance. No evangelism is undertaken and a strong in-group morality is developed; the sect withdraws from the world, or allows its members to be active in the world only for human betterment at the behest of conscience and at the periphery of social concern. It is indifferent to other religious movements.
>
> (Wilson, 1967:24)[42]

As already pointed out Santi Asoke has a strong ascetic utopian ethos.[43] Wilson sees the 'utopian' response as wishing to reconstruct the world, and replace its social organisation, being more 'active and constructive than the introversionist response of simply withdrawing from the world' (Wilson, 1973:26). While the introversionist category encapsulates the essence of Asokan belief and practice well, it fails to reflect Asoke's low-key example to society vis-á-vis its utopian communities. While the introversionist category is clearly the major one, the utopian classification reminds us of the gradual transformation Asoke expect to make on society.[44]

Roy Wallis' typology

According to Wallis (2003:36) 'world-rejecting' movements believe that society has pursued materialism to the extent that it 'has succeeded in creating a polluted environment; a vice-ridden society in which individuals treat each other purely as means rather than as ends; a world filled with conflict, greed, insincerity and despair. This sums up the Asoke understanding of the world in which they live. The pursuit of materialism is a result of attachment and causes suffering for the person who seeks to gain, as well as people who may be exploited as a result.

The Asoke communities are mirror images of what they perceive society to be. Those who join these communities (which are founded on a rigorous keeping of the Precepts) are affirmed in their desire to put into practice their desire to achieve a high level of mindfulness and non-attachment.

The Asoke movement not only criticises society, it also condemns the Thai *Saṅgha* as being lax in monastic disciplines. Particular criticisms are that mainstream monks have excessive funds available for personal use and that they do not practise vegetarianism. The movement models *Dhamma* values to society and the *Saṅgha* whose values they reject as they view them to be excessively materialistic.

Santi Asoke members are totally committed to their movement. Permanent guests and temple dwellers who do not work full time for Asoke (a very small minority), will engage in appropriate work outside the community, for example, operating a vegetarian restaurant. In their free time they will be involved in the activities of the community. A considerable number of non-temple-dwelling members (*yatitam*) who have secular jobs and/or family commitments find accommodation very close to the Asoke communities. This means they may participate in the community's activities and enjoy the support of their fellow members. Wallis' comment is apposite to this distinctive of the Asoke practice.

> The religious involvement of members is thus a full-time activity. The committed adherent will need to break completely with the worldly life in order to fulfil the movement's expectations, and separation may result in a rift with family and former friends, with conventional education and career. The movement is a 'total institution', regulating all its adherents' activities, programming all of their day but for the briefest periods of recreation or private time. Not only will the member live in the community, normally he will also work for it.
>
> (Wallis, 2003:39)

Santi Asoke, unlike ISKCON, the Unification Church and The Family, do not engage in street solicitation for funds.[45] Although monastics go on morning alms rounds like mainstream monks, they do not accept money. Indeed, Asoke communities will only accept a donation to their work if they think the donor has a good understanding of the movement. In the true sense of the term they may be considered as world-rejecting.

Lance Cousins' categories

Santi Asoke has a very strong focus on achieving insight and non-attachment through ascetic practice, vegetarianism, hard work – all conducted with a consistently high level of morality (*sīla*). This approach relates to 'ultimatism', one of several growing trends Cousins has observed in Southern Buddhism. Ultimatism is taking 'what is true from the viewpoint of ultimate truth, or at an advanced

level of spiritual practice as if it were the whole of Buddhism' (Cousins, 1997:409). Cousins goes on to mention that ultimatism in Southern Buddhism takes the form of a

> rejection of much traditional practice and ceremonial as well as of many of the outward forms customarily associated with merit-making activities. It is often supported by reference to early Buddhism, while in more extreme forms it may be associated with symbolic interpretation of rebirth and of supernatural elements in Buddhist tradition. The emphasis tends to be directed toward insight meditation and more rigorous interpretation of the Four Noble Truths.
>
> (Cousins, 1997:409)

Asoke's highly rationalistic expression of Buddhism seeks to draw support from its understanding of early Buddhist practice. The movement rejects a great deal of traditional Thai Buddhist practice. One example of this is the widespread practice of a monk reciting a short Pāla formula over an amulet (*pluksek*), or well-respected monks meditating in front of a collection of images in order to sacrilise them (*puttha pisek*). Asoke members poke fun at what they consider to be these superstitious practices. In contrast, they have their own *Pluksek* and *Puttha Pisek* ceremonies – extremely rigorous week-long events dedicated to listening to teaching several hours each day and engaging in ascetic activities designed to create mindfulness and non-attachment. This is what really brings out the power! Indeed, it is difficult to find an image of the Buddha in Asoke communities. Closer inspection of Asoke practice, however, indicates extremism rather than a narrow focus on a few key issues and the ignoring of everything else. It would appear that the ascetic practices of some Asoke lay members are closer to the excessively rigorous path the Buddha rejected, rather than the 'Middle-Way' he taught.

Conclusion

Inside perspective

Despite marginalisation by the Thai *Saṅgha* Santi Asoke members appear to practise unhindered. Their communities are miniatures of moral and fair societies. There the quest for upright living, with advice, training and support are offered to those whose goal is 'peace without suffering'.

Santi Asoke members have a great respect and fondness for their leader who they consider to be an enlightened being and a *Bodhisatta*. Although Bodhirak spends much of his time at Sisa Asoke, he frequently visits the other communities. His transparent lifestyle, wisdom and high standard of behaviour confirm his high moral standing or charisma (*pāramī*) among his followers.

Four key distinctives

The path from outsider through the various stages to *samaṇa* and *sikkhamat* is closely monitored and is much longer and more rigorous than the layman's progression to *phra* in the mainstream. The *sikkhamat* enjoys a comparable status to that of a *bhikṣunī* in the Mahāyāna tradition, given her teaching and leadership roles. The role of women is one example of a blurring of distinctions between the Mahāyāna and Theravāda schools. Vegetarianism and the use of the *Bodhisatta* ideal are two others. One possible explanation for this blurring of distinctions between the two traditions is that Bodhirak and a good number of the *samaṇa* and *sikkhamat* are from Chinese families where there was limited exposure to the Theravāda tradition but a familiarity with Mahāyāna practices such as the *Bodhisatta* concept and a belief in the superiority of a vegetarian diet.[46]

Outside perspective

Swearer (1991:668) and Keyes (1991:395) both understand Asoke to be a fundamentalist movement, although some of the features used to suggest fundamentalism also suggest a millenarian movement – a position held by Asoke researcher Heikkilä-Horn. Clearly there are parallels between Asoke and the millenarian movements that occurred in North-East Thailand, for example, marginalisation, a high regard for their leader and a 'them and us' mentality. Also the trend of millenarian movements to move from an 'expansive' to an 'astringent' phase fits Asoke's short history. The emphasis, however, on the necessity of self-effort coupled with the belief that Bodhirak is a great teacher but not a saviour make it impossible to sustain the position that Santi Asoke is a millenarian movement.

Base communities gave Latin Americans a sense of security and identity during the changes experienced by society in the 1960s. Groups of people organised around Catholic Christianity enjoyed mutual support and the experience of empowerment as they began together to take control of their own lives. Connections may be made between Catholic *base communities* and Asoke communities. Some examples include the reaction against excessive possessions acquired by individuals and the desire to take control of one's own life. An obvious dissimilarity between the two systems is that *base-community* members live in their own homes while many Asoke members live together on temple ground.

Community culture ideas are clearly discernible in the ethos of Asoke communities. Some examples of this include the improvement of peoples' spirit and environment through the resisting of capitalistic ways of development, economic self-reliance and commitment to maintaining the ethical/moral standards of the community. While *community culture* values may be observed in the Asoke communities, its roots do not go down into *community culture* thought. Santi Asoke has been shaped by the quest for a 'just' community and Buddhist

teachings such as a rigorous interpretation of the First Precept and the practice of non-attachment. Those who know Santi Asoke mention the references Bodhirak made in the early years of the movement to Gandhi and the Israeli *kibbutz*.

Aspects of utopianism were discussed and it was found that it may be misleading to categorise Santi Asoke as *retro*-utopian. While using images from the rural past such as lay members wearing farmers' clothes and using traditional ways of eating meals together, the movement, at the same time, is progressive in its use of technology. The better designation for Santi Asoke is 'ascetic/prophetic' utopian.[47] This captures the idea of very basic world-renouncing lifestyles which prophetically challenge Thai society which has been ensnared by excessive materialism and Western values.

Last, it has been observed that Asoke is an excessively legalistic movement where some lay people observe the Eight Precepts and other additional practices in an extremely rigorous manner. There is the risk that for some this will lead to a clinging to virtues and vows. On the other hand, less 'successful' practitioners may feel discouraged. I suggest that any legalistic approach to excessively rigorous practice is counter to the Middle-Way taught by the Buddha.

Use of typology

Santi Asoke clearly fit into Wilson's *introversionist* category. Asoke may also be described as a *world-rejecting* movement which has an attraction for those with high moral standards who have suffered some form of persecution/rejection. This is referred to by Glock and Stark as *ethical deprivation*. The movement fits into the *ultimatism* category, one of several trends observed by Cousins within Southern Buddhist countries. That is, taking an advanced level of spiritual practice as if it were the whole of Buddhism and focusing on it to the exclusion of other teaching. Asoke defends its rejection of much of traditional Thai Buddhist practice along with its appreciation for rationalism by referring to its understanding of early Buddhism. This is a further indicator of ultimatism.

Many Thai are becoming more socially engaged and ecologically aware. Because of the recent economic failure precipitated by reckless borrowing and lending, materialism is increasingly viewed as being detrimental to the nation. This would seem to bode well for the growth of the Asoke movement. Yet Asoke's ascetic approach is viewed as being too strict by the fun-loving Thai and is unlikely to grow significantly beyond the 10,000 members, or so, who are currently associated with the movement. Well does Sulak Siviraksa comment 'The strict demands made by Santi Asoke upon its followers will tend to limit its appeal' (*Bangkok Post,* 23.7.88).

In 2005, there were 105 *samaṇas* and 27 *sikkhamats*. Much of the success of the movement is due to the personality, leadership-style, and most importantly, *pāramī* (as perceived by Asokans) of the 71-year-old founder, who currently appears to be in good health. That said, one member informed me that Bodhirak had recently indicated he would not be with them much longer.[48] He informed

members that he still had much to teach and would need to work quickly. The participative-style-leadership approach taken by Bodhirak indicate that Santi Asoke may fare better than other movements when its founder passes away. There are a number of highly capable senior monks respected within the movement, and Bodhirak himself has indicated that he does not foresee difficulties in the area of future leadership.

Thai academic, Dr Puntarigvivat, is of the opinion that the treatment of Santi Asoke has sent a message to other Buddhist groups that if they wish to continue to be viewed as orthodox Buddhist, they need to be accepted by the *Saṅgha* hierarchy and the Thai state. He also made the interesting comment that Asoke continue their activities without using the Buddhist 'uniform' and the Buddhist 'brand name'.[49] Marginalisation by the *Saṅgha* means that many Thai now take the view that Santi Asoke is *not* 'proper Buddhism'. Excommunication by the *Saṅgha* means Asoke's serious approach to the religious life, including its anti-consumer message, will be viewed as subversive by those who support the status quo. On the other hand, it may be argued that Santi Asoke's continued existence, indeed, increasing maturity, prove that excommunication and survival are *not* mutually exclusive.

7

THE APPROACH OF SANTI ASOKE TO SPIRITUAL PURIFICATION

The Santi Asoke understanding of *nibbāna*

The general understanding in Thai Buddhism is that only a monk is likely to become an *Arahat*, and thus achieve *nibbāna*. According to Bodhirak, when one becomes an *Arahat*, then one experiences a state where one is completely free from self-centredness. The Asoke leader views *nibbāna* as a state of mind where one may work effortlessly for the benefit of others, as all attachments are severed. Bodhirak assures his followers that *nibbāna* 'can be reached in this life since it is a state of mind. *Nibbāna* is not something supernatural, or other worldly. To be enlightened means to be peaceful and calm' (Heikkilä-Horn, 1997:118).

To teach that *nibbāna* is within the grasp of the lay person is perceived by some traditionalists as undermining the spiritual status of the monastic community. Heikkilä-Horn (1997:118) is right to point out that if the *Saṅgha* is not seen as the focal point of superior spiritual practice, then it can no longer legitimise the state's political authority. Indeed, such a view challenges the standard understanding of the *Saṅgha* as the best 'field of merit'. Yet encouraging Asoke lay members to strive for enlightenment does not diminish the respect lay people show to Asoke *samaṇas* and *sikkhamats*. Asoke monastics lead lives which heavily involve them with lay members of the Asoke community. This is due in part to monastics working closely on administrative and practical tasks with volunteers, rather than studying or meditating in isolation. Monks in the mainstream normally live in a fair degree of isolation from the public. A significant number of Asoke members, however, live in the Asoke temples (*putthasathan*), and would have watched the progress of *samaṇas* and *sikkhamats* up through the ranks described in the Chapter 6. The blurring of the distinction between who may achieve *nibbāna* (monastics or lay people) is not problematic in the micro-Asoke context, as it is in macro-mainstream Thai Buddhism.

Bodhirak readily acknowledges that he has been influenced by Buddhadāsa. Yet he also believes that 'strong attachment to Buddhadasa's ideas by many people blocks perception of truth' (Jackson, 1989:165) and that Buddhadāsa (and his followers) did not go nearly far enough in applying theory to practice.[1]

Buddhadāsa viewed *nibbāna* as the original condition of the mind. It could be 'retained or re-attained by remaining mindful and by not allowing the delusions

and ignorance of "I" – "mine" to arise' (Jackson, 1988:165). Buddhadāsa recognised three levels of *nibbāna*:

- *Tadaṅganibbāna* (circumstantial-*nibbāna*): a state which comes about momentarily when external circumstances do not produce conditions for 'I', 'me' or 'mine' to arise. It is the attainment of a mental calm because of the influence of a peaceful environment. This state is not permanent, as a move to a troubled environment will lead to a loss of the *nibbānic* condition;
- *Vikhambhananibbāna* (arresting-*nibbāna*): this state is similar to the above but has been brought about because of the mental control exercised in *samādhi* meditation, in which intense concentration arrests or paralyses the arising of *kilesa* (Jackson, 1988:165). These defilements (*kilesa*) are not in fact abolished but arise again when meditation ceases;
- *Samucchedanibbāna* (cutting-off *nibbāna*): this state corresponds with the Thai traditional view of enlightenment. Here mental peace results from the termination, rather than the simple suppression, of mind-disturbing *kilesa* (Jackson, 1988:166).

Buddhadāsa regarded the first two stages of temporary *nibbāna* as a continuation of the development of a freed mind (Thai *chit-waang*) and a precursor to what he viewed as the third stage of *nibbāna* (which is the main traditional Thai understanding). His creative approach, while having its critics (e.g. Anan Senakhan), serves to make *nibbāna* more accessible to the lay community, and although deviating from traditional Thai teaching, Buddhadāsa is not viewed as being heretical. Although intellectually provocative, he was highly regarded as a scholar, and was not really viewed as a threat to Thai Buddhism, as he did not insist in a change of traditional practice, unlike Bodhirak.

The following quote is a helpful summary of the Asoke understanding of *nibbāna* (in life):

> It is the neutral state of the soul of living beings who have attained their perfect equilibrium, no feeling of content or discontent, neither attachment nor repulsion, no sense of egoism. It is a state full of nothing, a state of calm, tranquillity and total peace; a state of consciousness and complete knowledge of all. It is a state of the conscious awareness of only existing to be useful to all other living beings. It is the complete end of 'me'.
>
> (Heikkilä-Horn, 1997:118)[2]

Typical but less technical Asoke responses to 'what is *nibbāna*?' are: '*Nibbāna* is the state of mind when one is free from suffering'; '*Nibbāna* is beyond suffering'; '*Nibbāna* is a means of relieving oneself from suffering' and 'The way to *nibbāna* leads away from suffering' (Questionnaire Q4). These brief definitions are reflected in the Asoke use of the word *nibbāna* to describe freedom from an addiction. If, for example, a member ceases to crave coffee, he/she would

describe such an achievement as *nibbāna* from coffee (Thai *nippān jak caffe*). This achieving of non-attachment is viewed as a freedom from the suffering caused by the negative effects of this addiction. There is some congruence between this Asoke understanding of *nibbāna* and Buddhadāsa's concept of *tadaṅganibbāna* or *vikhambhananibbāna*.

In one of his sermons, Bodhirak raises the question 'is *nibbāna atta* or *anattā*?'[3] He uses the question to make the point that our uncertainty on the matter stems from our lack of insight. Before understanding the difference between *atta* and *anattā*, one has to have achieved *sammādiṭṭhi* (right view and understanding). According to Bodhirak, *atta* is found in the person who has not yet achieved *sammādiṭṭhi* and so still clings to (or dwells in) *avijjā* (ignorance). In contrast, the *Arahat* is *anattā*, free from all defilements and all forms of clinging. In the same sermon, Bodhirak criticises religions which believe in the 'great soul' (Thai *parmātman*) or God, which is simply another way to describe the 'great self' to which unenlightened people cling. Buddhism, by holding out the special insights of the Noble Eightfold Path, *Bojjhaṅga* (seven factors of enlightenment) and *Bodhipakkhiyādhamma* (37 qualities contributing to enlightenment) gives one the ability to achieve true knowledge. With such an understanding, one will know that God has no ontological existence and clinging to the concept is delusion. Bodhirak quotes from where the Buddha is recorded to have said that any religion which does not have the Noble Eightfold Path cannot have the four levels of holy people.[4] Indeed, Bodhirak takes the position that one who believes in God cannot purify his heart by the Noble Eightfold Path, as Buddhism (in his opinion) rejects the existence of God.

The Asoke philosophical position regarding the character of *nibbāna* is the antithesis of Wat Phra Dhammakāya's understanding. As we have seen, Wat Phra Dhammakāya asserts that *nibbāna* is *atta*. The meditator who has advanced to the stage of achieving *Dhammakāya Arahatta* (which is described as unconditioned) can thus be described as *atta*, as can *nibbāna* that 'blissful realm where the Buddha and other enlightened ones reside after death' (*Bangkok Post*, 21.12.98). Wat Phra Dhammakāya's provocative statement on *atta* is readily perceived by the Thai as not fitting in to the schema of Buddhism. Indeed, some identify it with Brahmanism.

Commenting on attempts to smuggle a 'self' into Buddhism, Walpola Rahula (1978:56) comments 'it will not do for anyone to try to introduce into Buddhism an idea which the Buddha never accepted, as far as we can see from the extant original texts.'[5] On the other hand, there is a suggestion (Lorgunpai, 1995:207) that one possible meaning for *anattā* may be lack of self-control. In the *Culasaccaka Sutta* an account is given of Saccaka suggesting to the Buddha that the five *khandhas* constituted a real self. The Buddha responds by asking Saccaka whether the King of Kosala or Magadha has power over subjects so that he could banish or execute one of his subjects should they so deserve. Saccaka answers that this is the case. The Buddha puts the following question to Saccaka, 'When you assert that the five *khandhas* are yourself, have you power over them, have

you control over them, so that you can say "Let my five *khandhas* be thus, let my five *khandhas* be not thus?"' Saccaka is unable to answer and acknowledges he was mistaken in his understanding of self.

With 'skill-in-means', the Buddha pointed out to Saccaka that genuine self is something over which one should have full control. Self, by definition, belongs to a particular person, that person should be able to exercise sovereignty over it. As one cannot exercise sovereignty over one's body and mind, we are in Karunadasa's (1994:109) words 'being possessed by our own possessions'. 'There is no self because we are unable to control the actions and reactions that are constantly arising and falling in our *khandhas*. Our *khandhas* have no leader, no guide, no inner controller' (Mackenzie, 1995c:16). Nevertheless, the one travelling on the Holy Path may be described as a *great self* (*mahattā*) (Harvey, 1995:56). This progression from a 'small self' to a *great self*, that is, a strong, calm person encapsulates ideas of progression in psychological strength and wisdom. The one who has entered into the *Dhamma* Stream understands that the empirical self is in constant flux and is thus not a permanent self in control of itself; this leads to enhanced spiritual strength. This perspective may lend some strength to the Wat Phra Dhammakāya belief that while *anattā* is appropriate to unenlightened beings, when a person is enlightened by insight into ultimate reality, it is more appropriate to speak of his/her condition as *atta*.

The Santi Asoke path to *nibbāna*

Santi Asoke's method in helping people is to show them *why* they suffer, for example, striving after possessions and clinging to people. By example, testimony and teaching, Asoke members demonstrate the minimising and transcending of suffering by letting go of all attachments. In sharp contrast to the Wat Phra Dhammakāya movement, Asoke de-emphasises the formal practice of meditation. Indeed, monks do not chant (which has a meditative quality) nearly as much as mainstream and Wat Phra Dhammakāya members. Asokans often poke fun at groups who have a strong focus on sitting or formal meditation by asking 'How does sitting with your eyes closed help you? When you open your eyes and stand up you are the same as before you started meditation!' The *samaṇa* from whom I obtained permission to stay at Pathom Asoke compared sitting meditation to a bottle of dirty water. If the bottle is kept still the sediment settles at the bottom of the bottle and the water appears clear. In other words, defilements are not seen. As the bottle is shaken the water becomes clouded with sediment. In a similar way the meditator's problems and defilements reappear once he/she stops meditating. For Asoke members 'every moment of the day should be meditation in the form of mindfulness (*sati*), consciousness and awareness of the surrounding world' (Heikkilä-Horn, 1997:161). As Asokans carry out their duties with mindfulness they will consider what defilements they have, and those more advanced on the spiritual path will think how they may be better examples to others of a life free from desires and concerns.

Despite negative comments about sitting meditation, Asoke members do use forms of meditation other than 'working with concentration'. There is a period of silence before the main (in many cases only) meal of the day, when members reflect on the work of the farmers in planting, caring for and harvesting the crops. After this silence, which usually lasts for a couple of minutes, a monk leads the group in a statement of appreciation for those who have worked the land on their behalf. Each day at noon in every Asoke community a gong is struck, and members spend a minute in silent meditation for global peace. More experienced members may also channel their thoughts into the wish that all beings may know freedom from suffering.'[6] Regular optional s*amatha* meditation sessions are often held in the afternoons at Asoke centres.[7] Some Asokans do practise basic *samatha* meditation briefly at the end of a busy day, as it helps them relax. In the three Asoke temples (*putthasathan*) which I visited, I observed corpses displayed in glass cases. Members may view these corpses in the traditional way to develop their understanding of impermanence.[8] On the other hand, the corpses tend to be seen as testimonies of Asoke members who attained a high level of moral practice before passing away. In viewing these corpses, members are inspired to emulate the high levels of non-attachment achieved by these departed Asoke members.[9] Asoke members are taught to walk with mindfulness in their training but 'walking-meditation' per se does not appear to be an essential feature of Asoke practice.

Asokans have a different approach to the Threefold Training of *sīla*, *samādhi and paññā*[10] than mainstream Thai Buddhists. Asoke members have an extremely strong emphasis on *sīla*, (even more so than mainstream) as well as a different approach to the development of the mind. In Question 1 of the questionnaire, 'What practices do you engage in so that you progress and achieve *nibbāna*?' there were no responses specifically related to sitting meditation. There was, however, an overwhelming response indicating moral development (*sīla*). The Asoke path to peace without suffering is one with an unusually high concentration on *sīla*.

The three following components of The Eightfold Path receive special emphasis in Thai Buddhism: Right View (*sammādiṭṭhi*), Right Effort (*sammāvayāma*) and Right Mindfulness (*sammāsati*) (Payutto, 1995:195). Bodhirak (1999:88) views Right Effort and Right Mindfulness as being the heart and brains of Right View (*sammādiṭṭhi*). Yet while recognising the interconnectedness of these three aspects, Varadhammo (1996:133) points out the importance of commencing the practice of the Eightfold Path by having the correct view. This is supported by Payutto (1995:192) when he writes

> [P]roper understanding [correct view] has been set up as the initial step because in the very first stages of practice a person must practise a conducive outlook, correct views and proper understanding for the course on which he is about to embark.

Proper understanding, or right view, (the eye which directs all other factors) is also foundational in the Asoke approach. Bodhirak (1999:88) flags up the

importance of having a right understanding of the Path, wrong understanding (*micchādiṭṭhi*) will lead only to wrong practice, resulting in wrong concentration (*micchāsamādhi)*.

Along with these three components mentioned above are four further aspects of The Path. They are:

- Right Thoughts (*sammāsaṅkappa*): the intended purpose for practising the moral precepts;
- Right Speech (*sammāvācā*): the Fourth Precept, that is, to abstain from false, divisive, harsh or pointless speech;
- Right Action (*sammākammanta*): this requires the practice of the first three of The Five Precepts, that is, abstaining from taking life, taking what is not given and sexual misconduct;
- Right Livelihood (*sammājīva*): this is fulfilled by observing the Five Precepts (*Pañica-Sīla*).

These seven core-constituents of the Noble Eightfold Path are viewed by Asokans as the first part of the Threefold training and are referred to as training in Higher Morality, or *adhisin* in Thai (Poompanna, 1989:23). Mainstream Buddhism views only right speech, right action and right livelihood as pertaining to *sīla* or moral virtue (Harvey, 1990:68). However,

> These seven paths mentioned above, is the first of the Threefold Training (Training in Higher Morality) which reduces craving and clinging. It helps to purify our minds and free it from the Five Hindrances which are sensual desire, ill-will, sloth and torpor, destruction and remorse, and uncertainty.
>
> (Poompanna, 1989:23)

If practitioners follow these seven aspects of The Eightfold Path they have the potential of achieving what they understand as right concentration (*sammāsamādhi*).[11] This is training in Higher Mentality, or concentration (*adhijit*), the second part of the Threefold Training. Traditionally, mental development (*samādhi*) is concerned with three factors: right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.

At this stage Asoke members are conducting their activities with high levels of morality and concentration. In time, the Asoke training in higher wisdom (*adhipaññā*, the third part of the Threefold Training) will lead to right insight into reality as 'The purified conscious mind will be able to perceive reality as it really is' (Poompanna, 1989:23). Perception of reality at this level leads to right insight and right deliverance. Poompanna appears and view this as an extra two steps making The Eightfold Path (Figure 7.1) into a Tenfold Path.[12] Heikkilä-Horn (1997:114) expresses it differently 'The final result of this method is a kind of additional step on the Noble Eightfold Path'. She understands Asoke as believing

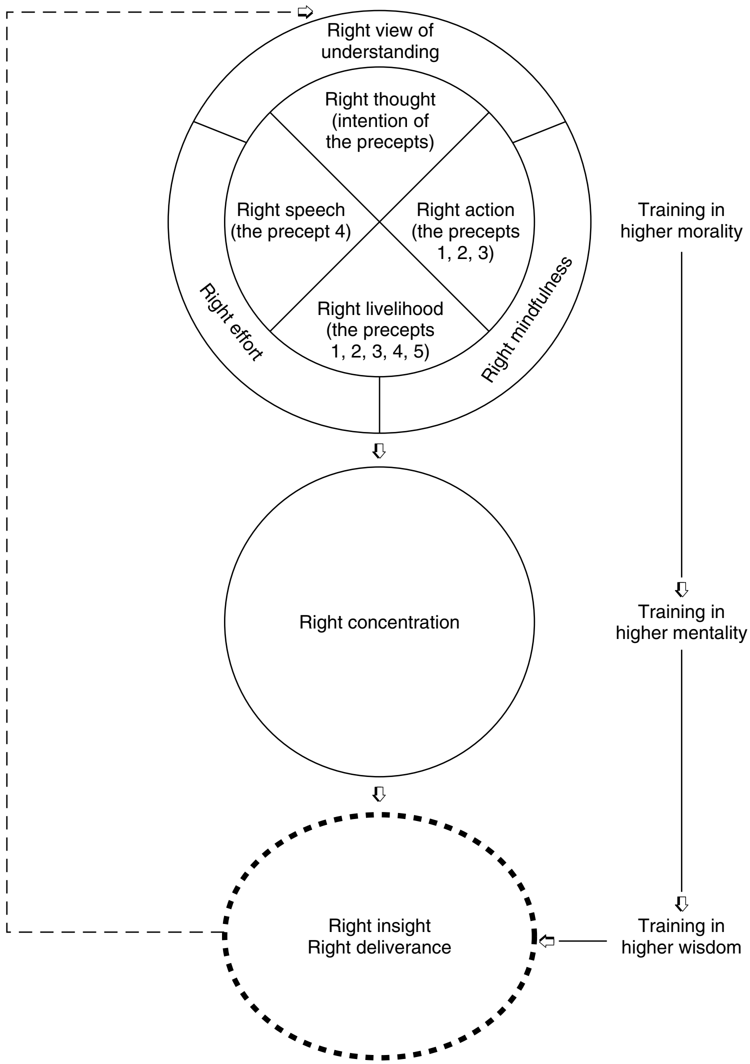


Figure 7.1 Santi Asoke's understanding of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Source: Poompanna (1989:25).

that right insight and right deliverance are an additional step and a result of training in Higher Wisdom. This Higher Wisdom (which is the ability to perceive reality as it is) will help elevate Higher Morality. This will feed into Higher Concentration which results in wisdom at a greater level. 'Each [factor] supports to elevate one another. This is the "dynamic" effect of the Noble Eightfold Path' (Unpublished Asoke paper).

'When one successfully practices the Eightfold Path, it is only a natural course that one will work harder, consume less and share the rest of what one has with society' (Unpublished Asoke paper). The development of the right conditions for enlightenment by strict moral behaviour, disciplined living and a highly developed sense of awareness lead to a high view of every conceivable activity. In terms of mental development, mundane activities such as physical labour, attending to personal hygiene and washing dishes are to the Asoke practitioner what visualising the crystal sphere is for the Wat Phra Dhammakāya member. During my time at a five-day Asoke camp, I was given detailed instructions as how to wash my used plate after the daily meal. This relatively long process (by Western standards) involved scraping what was leftover into appropriate slop buckets, washing the plate carefully with community produced soap and ensuring that the soap was wiped off the plate (in order to prolong the cleanliness of the rinsing water) before very careful rinsing. The whole operation was designed to produce the minimum of waste and to encourage mindfulness. Indeed, even the busy *sikkhamat*s, whose time is at a premium, will spend several hours each day doing manual work. An example of this is the *sikkhamat* in charge of teaching English in the school attached to Pathom Asoke, who spends several hours each day sewing torn garments. She views this manual labour as an important means of developing her mindfulness and a necessary supplement to her teaching and counselling work. As Heikkilä-Horn (1997:160) observes, 'For the Asoke people working is meditation.... every moment of the day should be meditation in the form of concentration, consciousness and awareness of the surrounding world.'

This approach to carrying out mundane activities with mindfulness and being aware of the present moment may appear similar to aspects of Zen practice. Certainly in reading the work of Buddhadāsa, Bodhirak would have been exposed to some Zen concepts. Mindfulness in daily tasks and having a 'free-mind' (Thai *chit-waang*) are two ideas in particular which Buddhadāsa drew from Zen and developed in the Thai Theravāda tradition.[13] Buddhadāsa viewed Zen as interesting, and a return to the basic teaching of the Buddha from a Mahāyāna worshipping of the *Bodhisattvas* (Jackson, 1988:211). Unlike Zen practitioners, though, Asoke members do not use sitting meditation (*zazen*) except to unwind at the end of a busy day. An essential feature of Asoke practice is that mindfulness arises from focus on daily tasks rather than concentration on a meditative object.

Phra Rajyanvisith is of the opinion that 'Santi Asoke focus on *sīla*, followers of Buddhadāsa concentrate on *paññā*, while the Wat Phra Dhammakāya movement sees the development of *samādhi* through *Dhammakāya* meditation as being very important.'[14] The abbot of Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāyaram went on to say that in his fraternity 'equal attention was given to the three aspects of the training'.

In mainstream Thai Buddhist thought, mental pollutants or defilements (*kilesa*) are seen as alien to the true nature of the mind and fall into three categories. The first category is *vītikkama* (transgression) or crude form. As the name suggests, they are easily identified through actions such as violent conduct, harsh speech and substance misuse. Troubles and restlessness in families, communities and

countries are brought about by the non-extinguishing of these defilements. This category of defilement is temporarily extinguished through moral practice (*sīla*). This may be compared to hacking away long grass to make a path. This produces a result which is still temporary, since before long the grass will grow and make the path impassable as before (Thitavanno, 1999:32). In medical terms, *sīla* is able to deal only with the symptoms of the disease, that is, the crude form of pollutants or *vītikkama*.

The second category of pollutants is referred to as the mild form, or *pariyuṭṭhāna* (pervading). These pollutants act on the conscious mind. These are less obvious than the previous category; their effect, however, is dangerous as they prevent mental development. This may occur through lust, hatred and distraction, and these are inhibited through the practice of meditation (*samādhi*). As soon as the control measures are slackened, 'the "culprits" will spring into action again, often with a vengeance, since their roots are still intact' (Thitavanno, 1999:32).

The third category of pollutants is referred to as the subtle form, or latent tendency (*anusaya*). As the name suggests, these pollutions are hard to identify. They are extinguished through wisdom (*paññā*). This is in effect the digging up and removing of the defilements.

Mainstream Thai Buddhism regards Asoke's focus on *sīla* in order to be free from suffering as inadequate. The lack of formal meditation practice means that anything beyond crude defilements will not be adequately dealt with, and wisdom will not be achieved.[15] Bodhirak, however, himself views the other approaches within the Thailand as being 'incomplete' (Poompanna, 1989:16).

The Eightfold Path is first followed at the mundane level (*lokiya*). Most Buddhists practise at this level, the goal being the accumulation of merit and a better rebirth, rather than enlightenment. The Middle Way may also be followed at a supramundane (*lokuttara*) level; this then is referred to as the Noble Eightfold Path (*Ariya-Magga*). When a person has been freed from the defilements of self-belief (belief in the *Khandhas* as somehow related to a permanent self), and doubt and superstition (clinging to virtue, vows and rituals as sufficient for enlightenment) then such a person has attained the lowest level in the supramundane plane, and become a Stream-enterer (*Sotāpanna*). 'At stream-entry, a person gains a first glimpse of *nibbāna* and the 'stream' which leads there, and enters this, the Holy Eightfold Path' (Harvey, 1990:69). Such a person will reach enlightenment within seven lifetimes. According to Heikkilä-Horn (1997:117), Asoke teaches that a person becomes a Stream-enterer when that person is free of the following six vices: 'drinking, smoking, gambling, practising illicit sex, frequenting night entertainment, and laziness'.[16] Showing respect to the Triple Gem and keeping the Five Precepts in the rigorous Asoke style are also seen as prerequisites to 'Stream-entry'. As stated earlier, Asoke members are strict vegans and would view meat eating as a violation of the First Precept. It is impossible, according to Santi Asoke members to be a meat eater and a person on the Noble Eight-fold Path.

The person on the next level of enlightenment is called a *Sakadāgāmi* or Once-returner.

> A Once-returner can only be reborn once in the sense-desire world, as a human or lower god. Any other births will be in the higher heavens. This is because he has destroyed the gross forms of the next two fetters, sensual desire and ill-will.
>
> (Harvey, 1990:71)

Asoke's belief is the same as mainstream when it teaches that a person moves from being a *Sotāpanna* to a *Sakadāgāmi* by becoming free of the gross forms of the fetters of sensual desire and anger. There is an expectation in the Asoke communities that a *Sakadāgāmi* should be keeping the Eight Precepts.

At the next stage of enlightenment a person is referred to as an *Anāgami*, or Never-returner.

> A person who has reached this level cannot be reborn in the sense-desire world. His insight is not quite sufficient for him to become an *Arahat*, and if he does not manage to become one later in life, he is reborn in the first of the five 'pure abodes' the most refined heavens in the pure form world, where only Non-returners can be reborn. In these he matures his insight till he becomes a long-lived *Arahat*-god.
>
> (Harvey, 1990:71)

The *Anāgāmi* has completely broken the fourth and fifth fetters, so that there are no traces of sensual desire and ill will. Santi Asoke explain that an *Anāgāmi* 'feels no temptation to worldly pleasures, and worldly events do not have any effect on him or her. The person at this level still has some defilements within his or her mind, but they are not shown outside' (Heikkilä-Horn, 1997:117).

The noble person who succeeds in breaking all of the ten fetters reaches the final level of enlightenment and becomes an *Arahat*. Such a person is

> free from the idea of 'self', and can work for the benefit of others because he himself or she herself has no self [no sense of 'I am']. This stage is *nibbāna*, which is a state of mind in which the person has no self, and thus no selfishness, anger, greediness or delusion.
>
> (Heikkilä-Horn, 1997:117)

Bodhirak, in the early days of the movement, declared himself as being at the second stage on the Noble Path – a *Sakadāgāmi* (Poompanna, 1989:16). Asoke members say Bodhirak is simply telling the truth about his own enlightenment, yet it is against the *vinaya* for a monk to disclose the stage of his spiritual enlightenment. He has also implied that he is a reincarnation of or, at the very least, a follower in the footsteps of Phra Sāriputta (Poompanna, 1998:14).[17] Asoke members, however, now regard Bodhirak as an *Arahat* (Heikkilä-Horn, 1997:110), one who has been enlightened through his own spiritual search, and who, because of his great compassion has returned as an important *Bodhisatta* to teach true

Buddhism.[18] Asokans believe that an *Arahat* may choose to be a *Bodhisatta*. They understand that a *Bodhisatta* would enter *nibbāna* from where he could return to this world to assist others. An *Arahat*, on his passing, would enter *parinibbāna* from where he would be unable to return to help others.

Training and support given on the path

As already noted at the end of the previous chapter temple residents and permanent guests are required to fill in 'The Eight Precepts Check Book' (*Check Sen*) and submit it to their spiritual adviser each week. This is an optional task for a member who does not reside at the temple (*yatitam*) but is obligatory for the temple dweller (*akhantuka pracham*). Members I spoke to viewed accountability structure as a helpful way to receive advice from an experienced practitioner. One former member, while positive about some aspects of the movement felt that some members were excessively competitive about achieving high standards of moral practice.[19] He indicated that this resulted in condemnation of those who did not maintain high standards. The use of the 'Check Book' is an official part of the Asokan's training and is an opportunity for a *samaṇa* or *sikkhimat* to mentor a temple dweller in his/her spiritual development.

Temple dwellers have ample opportunity to work alongside *samaṇas* and *sikkhamats*. They are usually given tasks in keeping with their secular training or abilities. When they 'win their spurs' they are offered increased responsibilities, should they so wish. Attending morning meetings, listening to audio tapes/ reading Bodhirak's sermons and going to the rigorous annual *Pluksek* and *Puttha Pisek* events, as well as engaging informal discussion with more experienced practitioners, are all important components to the training and support on the Asoke path to 'peace without suffering'. Members may feel that their development is facilitated through recognition as a practitioner (*patepat*) and higher. As seen from the Chapter 6, such progression takes considerable time and is closely monitored by monastics.

Conclusion

A common understanding of *nibbāna* in the Asoke communities is a mind free from attachment and suffering. This may be achieved by lay members as well as monastics. Intense focus (*sati*) on the task being carried out leads members to identify defilements and attachments in their own minds. Training in Higher Morality (*adhisin*) draws on the practice of the following interconnected seven components: (1) Right Understanding or View; (2) Right Effort; (3) Right Mindfulness; (4) Right Thought; (5) Right Speech; (6) Right Action; (7) Right Livelihood. The achieving of Right Concentration (*sammāsamādhi*), the eighth component of the Noble Eightfold Path, trains the practitioner in Higher Mentality (*adhijit*). This is the second part of the Threefold Training.

As Asokans conduct their activities with high levels of morality and concentration, insight will eventually evolve. This is acquiring Higher Wisdom (*adhipaññā*), the third part of the Threefold Training. Perception of reality at this level leads to right insight (*adhisammāpothe*) and right (full) deliverance from all ten fetters. This final stage is enlightenment (Thai *balu* or *tratru*), the ultimate goal of the Asoke practitioner.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion begins with five sections which correspond to the research objectives outlined at the beginning of the thesis. Summary tables of the similarities and differences between the two movements follow. Finally there is a consideration of issues for further research.

How the Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke movements began and developed

This has been set out in Chapters 2 and 5 respectively. The propagation of *Dhammakāya* meditation for a new generation appears to have been the purpose of the group that left Wat Paknam and set up a *Dhammakāya* meditation centre which later became Wat Phra Dhammakāya. This model of meditation was popularised for young Thai students. The movement began to be patronised by older Thai, who were attracted not only by *Dhammakāya* meditation but also by well-educated monks and lay followers.

Bodhirak's excessively disciplined approach to his monastic practice and his criticisms of the laxity of fellow monks struck a chord with some Thai who were disillusioned with the standards of mainstream monastic practice. They tended to be those who had been marginalised by the establishment, for example, government workers who led honest lives but were persecuted by dishonest colleagues. Had Bodhirak quietly pursued gradual reform within the *Saṅgha*, he may well have been allowed to remain within it. Some temples are known to have a particular emphasis and Bodhirak, in time, may have become abbot of a temple known for ascetic practice and vegan diet. Bodhirak's highly critical approach and refusal to comply with orders from senior monks led him into repeated conflicts. Thai Buddhism tolerates a wide range of beliefs but when praxis is changed the *Saṅgha* feels threatened. Thus excommunication was inevitable for Bodhirak and his followers.

Physical space is used by both movements to create a particular ambience. The 300-acre expanse of Wat Phra Dhammakāya, and the 40-acre hall which can accommodate 300,000 meditators serve to create a feeling (among members) of being part of a successful movement. The *cetiya* (*stūpa*), in particular, inspires

a recollection of the qualities of the Buddha among members. It also reminds them of the ongoing need for giving to the work of the temple, keeping the Precepts and the practice of *Dhammakāya* meditation. All members wear white outfits; this creates an impression of unity and tranquillity. The large suite of well-administered offices along with the attentive nature of the many officials further enforce the temple's success ethos. The Thai desire to be part of something big and successful is played to by many organisations – Wat Phra Dhammākaya is no exception. The temple sanctuary (*bot*) while obviously Buddhist, differs in style from the typical Thai pattern. This epitomises the enigma of Wat Phra Dhammakāya. It is clearly Thai Buddhist, yet with significant differences. The temple sanctuary is some way from the centrally located Great Sapha Dhammakāya hall where meditation takes place. This could give the impression that meditation, which takes place within the Great Sapha Dhammakāya hall, is central to the movement's activities. The hemispherical, 108 metre diameter *cetiya* is only used on special occasions.[1] At all other times, access is denied by security guards. The intrigue created by this massive, closely guarded structure contributes not only to the mystery of the myth of the Black and White *Dhammakāya* but also to the true identity of the leader and the purpose of the temple.

Santi Asoke has created its space to demonstrate how Buddhist communities should function and how they may be the locus for an individual's freedom from suffering. A rural atmosphere of a previous generation is created through members walking barefoot and wearing peasant dress. The use of simple homemade natural fertilisers, basic farm machinery and members sitting on the ground in two rows facing each other while eating along with a meditation on thanksgiving to the farmers before eating all signify a land-dependent community with a simple lifestyle. The presence of schools within these communities and the pupils' involvement in the life of the community communicate a sense of vitality and optimism for the future. Shops located at the entrance to these communities sell basic commodities at low prices. This is a deliberate acting out of Asoke's anti-consumerist, anti-capitalist world view. The Asoke message is best expressed through communities rather than a high-profile centre like Wat Phra Dhammakāya.[2] These utopian communities are places where justice is to be found, as well as support for those who wish to practise selflessness.

The appeal of Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke to their respective membership

The leaders of both movements are perceived by their respective followers as having unique leadership qualities. Phra Dhammachayo's power is rooted in the belief among some of his followers that he is an *Avatāra*.[3] He is considered to be very advanced in his meditative prowess, and his ability to teach *Dhammakāya* meditation. This perception of his power is enhanced by his remoteness from day to day living at Wat Phra Dhammakāya. Phra Dhammachayo appears for special occasions when he performs very well

in preaching and leading in meditation. The non-appearance of the leader at meetings and in the day-to-day running of the temple is explained by his poor health. He normally wears dark glasses as his eyes are sensitive to the light. He suffers from diabetes as well as a skin condition. Phra Dhammachayo's remoteness means there is no possibility that familiarity will breed contempt! The leader's reclusive nature, however, means that monks and those who work at the temple may carry out their duties in a more relaxed manner. Wat Phra Dhammakāya members believe that while they remain under Phra Dhammachayo's authority they will benefit from his power.

In contrast, Bodhirak is never out of earshot of his monks. He is easily accessed by members and non-members alike. Indeed, it may be said he is 'on show' all the time. This transparency brings a warmth and trust to the relationship between Bodhirak and his followers. Wat Phra Dhammakāya may respond by saying it would be a member's dream to be granted an audience with Phra Dhammachayo. Bodhirak's power is understood by Asokans to reside in his *parāmī*, which, for them, is demonstrated in their leader's selfless behaviour, skilful leadership (through difficult times) and teaching/preaching abilities. The flattened hierarchy of Asoke communities appeals to the Thai appreciation of freedom. This research has discovered a considerable level of disenchantment among the Thai with Thai Buddhism and the way the *Saṅgha* is administered. The study of the movements is partly the story of the re-enchantment of Thai Buddhism for perhaps 80,000 Thai Buddhists. Thai who are now Wat Phra Dhammakāya members wished for well-educated monastics, as well as programmes and teaching geared for people in the fast lane of commerce or professional life. Those who joined Santi Asoke wanted to be part of a group of people who sought a rigorous approach to Buddhist practice. Living with, or at least in close association with Asoke members was enormously attractive to those who were persecuted by colleagues, or family because of their virtuous lifestyle.

A more academic approach as exemplified by Phra Buddhadāsa and Phra Dhammapiṭaka would not offer the spiritual protection and excitement for the type of people attracted by Wat Phra Dhammakāya. Those who find Santi Asoke's approach appealing would agree with much of what Buddhadāsa has said but would feel that he had not leapt the firebreak from theory to praxis.

Outsider's (*etic*) analysis of the two movements

There are certain fundamentalist tendencies within Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke. Both movements share the following criteria which Swearer (1991:678) has cited for fundamentalism within Theravāda Buddhism:

- Being led by strong, charismatic leaders;
- Followers who perceive themselves to be under some kind of threat;
- A stress on the value of direct experience coupled with simple religious practice.

Wat Phra Dhammakāya presents two further distinctives which Swearer has suggested are indicative of a fundamentalist movement. They are:

- An obsessive sense of their unique destiny;
- Ideologies which tend to rest upon simplistic, dualistic and absolutistic world views.[4]

Each of the nine distinctives of fundamentalism as set out by the American-based 'Fundamentalism Project' may be clearly identified in Wat Phra Dhammakāya. Only three of these nine distinctives may be observed in the Asoke movement. An initial glance, however, may suggest Asoke to be the more fundamentalist of the two movements. Its creation of ascetic–prophetic utopian communities and high view of living simply, off the land serve to create this impression. In comparing both movements to the two sets of criteria for fundamentalism (Harris, 2001:10; Swearer, 1991:678), it is the ultra-modern, 'user-friendly' Wat Phra Dhammakāya which is, surprisingly, considerably more fundamentalist than Santi Asoke.

Wat Phra Dhammakāya is to some extent currently functioning as a millenarian movement for a number of its members. Those who believe in the myth circulating at Wat Phra Dhammakāya will believe in a final showdown between the White and Black *Dhammakāya* and will wish deliverance. Association with Phra Dhammachayo will ensure salvation, as he is understood to be an *Avatāra* with great powers. Members who have not heard the myth, or are unsure about it, will still view their leader as a person with merit due to his alleged spiritual powers.[5] It may well be that some of these members have a reliance on the merit of their leader to secure financial success in the current period of economic uncertainty. This is reminiscent of the 1970s when middle-to upper-class Thai who were members of the Huppasawan movement looked to Suchart, their leader, for protection from the loss of wealth and power that would befall them should communism gain increased influence within the nation.

It seems inappropriate to classify Santi Asoke as a millenarian movement. Asokans highly esteem Bodhirak's level of spiritual attainment, yet they recognise his inability to liberate them from their suffering. Bodhirak, according to Asoke membership, has the unique ability to set out the right path to liberation. Liberation, however, comes about through the disciplined endeavours of practitioners. The movement's members believe that their leader is a teacher who has reached a high level of enlightenment, rather than a saviour. They have a long-term commitment to modelling the *Dhamma*. Indeed, Bodhirak believes it will take 500 years of the example of Asoke community living before Thai society will adjust to governance informed by *Dhamma* principles. In addition, Asokans do not wish to gain materially. Clearly this is not the profile of a millenarian movement.

Wat Phra Dhammakāya has been accused of creating 'commodity Buddhism'. The item, associated transaction and results are clearly explained almost as if one were making a purchase. For example, the 'Millionaire Forever Project' involved

the monthly payment of the equivalent of £17 to the temple's food fund for the duration of the donor's life. As a result, donors were promised wealth in each of their subsequent lives. On the other hand, some of the publicity material requesting donations for a specific temple project do not mention a specific reward.[6] They simply call for a contribution to a particular cause. To assist the donor to recall the generous deed, a monk may present a memento of the act of giving.

Prosperity Buddhism is closely related to *commodity Buddhism*. Wat Phra Dhammakāya encourages its members to give. The more a person gives the more the giver (*dāyaka*) will generate good *karma* (*puñña*). Allegations have been made that Wat Phra Dhammakāya sales-team members place excessive pressure on potential donors. These charges are widely believed and form current public perception of the movement. Wat Phra Dhammakāya denies the charges and points out that the police did not receive any complaints from donors.

Those familiar with the 'base-community' movement (mainly Roman Catholic clergy) may identify some similarities between base communities and Santi Asoke. These include the moving away from central ecclesiastical control to a flattened hierarchy and the insistence that theory must be applied to praxis. Base communities flourished in Latin America partly because people aspired to participate in the decisions which affected them. There is congruence here between what happened in Latin America and the Asoke situation. The main dissimilarity is that base-community members continue to live in their own homes but come together to work and reflect on issues concerning them as a community. Indeed, Asoke might be closer to a combined monastery and convent than a base community. This is based on the idea that all committed Asoke members live in community and practise an ascetic lifestyle whether they are monastics or lay people. Given that Gandhi has been an inspiration to Bodhirak it may also be worthwhile to compare Asoke communities to *ashrams* in India.[7]

The values of the 'community-culture' school of thought (Thai *wathanatham chumchon*) are similar to those exhibited by Santi Asoke. These are the devolution of decision-making powers to communities and the commitment to developing people and their environment. Asoke members, however, are unaware of community-culture thought and see their community lifestyle as coming directly from Bodhirak.

It is the writer's opinion that Santi Asoke may best be described as an ascetic utopian movement with strong nomian (legalistic) tendencies.[8] While Asoke members may look back to a period when people lived simple lives depending on the land, the reality is that they have a vision for a future society to be regulated by the *Dhamma*. Such a society, in Asoke's opinion, is infinitely preferable to the excessively materialistic, secularised, Western-value espousing dystopia to be found in Thailand. Indeed, it would seem best to categorise Santi Asoke as an ascetic and prophetic utopian movement modelling a simple but non-suffering lifestyle.

The daily recording of any breach of the Eight Precepts and the weekly presentation of this list to a spiritual adviser appears a salutary exercise. It may be

viewed as the laity adopting the monastic practice of confession. However, disciplines originally used to discover unhelpful attachments have been elevated by some more zealous members to the level of a test of commitment to the Asoke path. One example would be abstention from washing oneself for several days. The Pharisees of the Jewish tradition developed complex behavioural codes in order to ensure they did not violate any of God's laws. Devotion to the law was apparent, yet there was also a certain amount of pride in and attachment to their law keeping and achievements. There was also a disdain for those who were less rigorous in observance. In a similar way some Asoke members, it is alleged, are proud of their practice and condemnatory of fellow members who do not manage to sustain such 'committed' behaviour. What were originally presented as possible occasional methods for the development of spiritual practice have for some become a sign of commitment to the Asoke path. Failure to live up to these extreme standards results in criticism and discouragement for a number of excessively legalistic practitioners. Nomianism is simply excessive attachment to a legal system, and is far from the Middle Way espoused by the Buddha. Indeed, the clinging to precepts, vows and practices is viewed as a spiritual fetter by Buddhists.

Four sets of typologies of New Religious Movements were applied to these movements. Wat Phra Dhammakāya's beliefs and practice locate it within the following main categories:

- Psychic deprivation (Glock and Stark, 1965:247); temple members tend to be well-educated, middle class, Thai city dwellers. This homogenous unit is characterised by the desire to integrate religious practice with a prosperous lifestyle. The traditional Thai temples do not come up to the expectations of Wat Phra Dhammakāya members in areas such as cleanliness of the temple and its grounds and education of the monks. Wat Phra Dhammakāya offers a modern, efficiently administered system, with dynamic leaders. In the process they create a re-enchantment of Buddhism for those who have previously felt that what was on offer was totally irrelevant for their purposes;
- 'Conversionist' and 'thaumaturgical' are two of Bryan Wilson's seven categories (Barnard and Burgess, 1996:332; Wilson, 1973:18–30) that apply to Wat Phra Dhammakāya. The conversionist aspect of the movement presents in the way a member will seek to have a transformed life. This transformation results in salvation from a variety of evils, for example, financial misfortune and future suffering in hells. The 'supernatural' or 'magical' approach locate Wat Phra Dhammakāya within the thaumaturgical category. For example, the belief that a new world opens up when one begins to practise *Dhammakāya* meditation. Thus, there may be the developing of certain qualities such as clairaudience, or wishes coming true in a way not previously experienced;
- Roy Wallis' (2003:52) 'world-affirming' category resonates with Wat Phra Dhammakāya members' desire not to escape from the world but rather experience the world's benefits more fully;

- 'Buddhist modernism' (some customs and values based on Christian practices), 'revival of meditation' and 'esotericism' are trends which Lance Cousins' (1997:408–11) has observed within Southern Buddhism. They may be applied to Wat Phra Dhammakāya.

Santi Asoke beliefs and practice resonate with the following categories:

- 'World-rejecting'; one of Roy Wallis' three categories (Wallis, 2003:36–44). Asoke's rejection is evidenced in its condemnation of the Thai *Saṅgha* as being too lax in its monastic disciplines, and Thai society for becoming excessively materialistic and selfish;
- 'Ethical deprivation'; one of Glock and Stark's (1965:247) five categories. That is, Asoke members have very high ethical standards, and as a result, experience persecution in society, or at least feel a wide gulf between their own standards and that of society;
- 'Introversionist'; one of Brian Wilson's seven categories (Barnard and Burgess, 1996:332; Wilson, 1973:23). This describes an Asoke mindset where they consider their position to be 'enlightened' and one which outsiders are unlikely to accept;
- 'Ultimatism' (Cousins, 1997:409); Asoke have distinct spiritual practices which are emphasised to the exclusion of other aspects of Buddhism. The movement rejects much of mainstream Thai Buddhist practice. An example of this is the Asokan disdain for a respected monk meditating in front of an image in order to sacrilise it. Asoke members 'sacrilise' themselves by participating in two annual, arduous week-long 'boot-camps'. They give these camps the same names (*Putta Pisek* and *Pluksek*) as are used for the processes of monks trying to sacrilise images!

The use of these typologies force an examination of these two movements through a variety of lenses. This ensures that a variety of perspectives is covered. It also demonstrates that the movements under consideration share several of the characteristics of New Religious Movements. Indeed, six similarities were identified between Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Sōka Gakkai, the New Japanese lay-Buddhist Movement.[9]

The methods used by the movements for spiritual development

Wat Phra Dhammakāya and particularly Santi Asoke both emphasise that spiritual development takes place with the support of like-minded friends – a traditional Buddhist idea. Both movements are convinced of the efficacy of their approach to spiritual development. Wat Phra Dhammakāya emphasises a distinctive form of *samatha* meditation, while Santi Asoke stresses *sīla* (moral virtue) and *sati* (mindfulness). Not surprisingly these are the key distinctives of each movement. The teaching and practice of *Dhammakāya* meditation is the focus

of Wat Phra Dhammakāya and its various cell groups. *Dhammakāya* meditation is presented as the missing kernel (*sudhamma* meaning 'true *Dhamma*') of Buddhism. An expectation that certain phenomena may arise during meditation is set out in the teaching literature and tapes. Testimonies of members also contribute to the meditator's expectations. Through skilful introduction, meditation instructors create a sense of tranquillity for their students. The movement would not have such a following if members did not benefit from *Dhammakāya* meditation. Members claim meditation purifies thoughts and intentions. They also claim an increased ability to achieve their goals and gain insight into the nature of reality.

Santi Asoke's approach to spiritual development is to facilitate an austere, indeed monastic lifestyle for lay people. This is done in supportive communities where use is made of accountability to monastics and peers. Right Mindfulness and Right Effort enhance awareness of self and the surrounding world. Defilements (crude, mild and latent) are identified and progressively extinguished by practising the Asoke approach to the Eight Fold Path. As attachments and defilements are dealt with, the practitioner will increasingly experience 'peace without suffering'. It would appear that very rigorous patterns of behaviour by zealous members became a standard for Asoke members to follow. This leads to a legalistic (perhaps at times less than tolerant) group within some of the Asoke communities. Santi Asoke promotes a highly regimented lifestyle within its ascetic/prophetic utopian communities. Through observing very strict practices, keeping rules and being accountable, members identify and extinguish their defilements and attachments. This ascetic life is seen as worthwhile by those who are suffering as it is understood to lead to *peace without suffering*.

Possible implications for Thai society

Buddhism in Thailand has traditionally enjoyed the patronage of the king and government. In return it has legitimised the monarchy and government. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the government's organisation of a state school system initiated a downturn in lay peoples' reliance on their local temples. The move away from an agricultural-based economy, urbanisation, and the media's reporting of monastic improprieties are all key factors in the continuing loss of the *Saṅgha*'s influence in society. The *Saṅgha* is keenly aware of this phenomenon. Many monastics and lay Buddhists feel betrayed by the government's decision not to officially recognise Buddhism as the state religion. The government defended its action by saying that it did not wish to create tension within society by having two categories of citizens, namely Buddhist and non-Buddhist. This is a gloss on a collage of issues such as the lay people's disenchantment with the *Saṅgha* and the reluctance of educated people to have their socio-political landscape dominated by institutions such as the military, and religion (despite 94 per cent of the population being Buddhist). The Thai government probably feels that a close connection between government and religion would be viewed as dated by modern Western governments.

The existence of Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke indicate that a section of the people are disenchanted with mainstream Thai Buddhism, yet do not want to abandon Buddhism. The two movements have offered teaching, lifestyle and practice in keeping with the aspirations of their followers (Tables C.1 and C.2). Santi Asoke's excommunication from the *Saṅgha* was meant to marginalise the movement as heterodox. This loss of 'brand name' (monks had to change what they called themselves and their temples) and 'packaging' (monks also had to adopt different colour/style of robes) initially meant that the movement was perceived as not being authentically Buddhist. A key lesson from this situation is that excommunication and survival are not mutually exclusive. It is possible to survive and prosper as a Buddhist group in Thailand outside the state-regulated *Saṅgha*.

There was a period in 1999 when there was a strong cry from every area of Thai society for Wat Phra Dhammakāya to be expelled from the *Saṅgha*. Indeed the temple's leaders themselves seriously considered leaving the *Saṅgha*. To the surprise of many, the movement weathered the storm and remained within the *Saṅgha*. If Wat Phra Dhammakāya had left, the sheer number of members, their political and business connections and public-relations acumen would have ensured that the work of Wat Phra Dhammakāya would have continued much as before. This would have further challenged the competence of the *Mahā thera samakom*, and the role of the *Saṅgha* and state-regulated Buddhism at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Not only has Wat Phra Dhammakāya remained within the *Saṅgha*, it is facilitating the institution's elderly leadership by providing administrative expertise and support. This symbiotic relationship

Table C.1 Summary table of similarities between Wat Phra Dhammakāya (WPD) and Santi Asoke (SA)

1	Both use space, symbol and 'uniform' to express their ethos. WPD project a contemporary, progressive image. SA express their simple, anti-materialistic lifestyle by creating rural/agriculture-based communities reminiscent of a bygone era
2	Both view their leader as having reached a high state of enlightenment and moral stature/charisma (*pāramī*)
3	Both appeal to Thai who are disenchanted with mainstream Thai Buddhism
4	Both perceive themselves to be under threat
5	Both have a rigorous (and distinctive path) for spiritual development and a high standard for temple dwellers or those who seek ordination
6	Both emphasise the importance of good friends for ones spiritual development
7	Both have been heavily criticised by the *Saṅgha*. SA has been excommunicated while WPD are now actively involved in helping the *Saṅgha* leadership
8	Both have practices that are not in keeping with traditional expressions of Thai Buddhism, though these are still identifiably Buddhist
9	Both achieve enhanced credibility through adopting forest-monk practices
10	Both associate their identity with early Buddhism. WPD refer to the alleged meditative practice of the Buddha. SA members live simple, austere lives in communities that live off the produce of the land. This gives the impression of having returned to the essential features of Buddhism

Table C.2 Summary table of differences between Wat Phra Dhammakāya (WPD) and Santi Asoke (SA)

1	WPD (despite its highly progressive image) is more fundamentalist in its approach than SA
2	WPD may be described as a millenarian movement (at least for a good number of its membership). SA is not millenarian. It is world-rejecting and views its leader as a teacher, not a saviour
3	WPD is hierarchical; SA is egalitarian
4	WPD integrates religious practice with a prosperous lifestyle while SA is anti-materialistic. Both have differing perspectives on economic theory and practice and justify their positions from Buddhist thought
6	WPD remain within the *Saṅgha* (despite a trial and censorship). SA has been excommunicated from the *Saṅgha* and as a result are viewed by some as 'not proper Buddhist'
7	SA maintain a strict vegetarian diet and are critical of non-vegetarian practice; PD do not share SA's interpretation of the First Precept and are not vegetarian
8	WPD emphasise *dāna*, in the form of material giving. SA's emphasis is on the *dāna* of dedicated effort

brings credibility and power to Wat Phra Dhammakāya and greatly assists the *Saṅgha* leadership. The crisis which could have precipitated a serious loss of credibility for the *Saṅgha* has passed. Many Thai people, however, have moved beyond accepting the legitimising and unifying role of state-regulated Buddhism.

The three pillars of Thai society are considered to be the people, Buddhism and the monarchy. King Bhumibol (born in 1927) ascended the throne in 1946. He enjoys the enormous respect and affection of his people. Indeed, the vast majority of the population will not remember a time when he was not their king. It is conceivable, however, that a new generation of Thai may view a new monarch in a different light. Should Thai people lose confidence in these two traditional supports of Thai society, an unstable situation could well emerge. It may well be that in a period of social unrest or power vacuum; a political faction may call for military intervention and appeal to state-regulated Buddhism for the legitimisation of a particular course of action. It will then be demonstrated that Buddhism is no longer the unifier and legitimiser that it once was.

Issues for further research

Due to (understandable) lack of openness to me as a researcher, I was unable to explore to the degree that I wished, some of Wat Phra Dhammakāya's more esoteric beliefs. These include the nature of the Black and White *Dhammakāya* and the spiritual conflict (*wicha-rop*) between them. The examination/comparison of spiritual power and the nature of spiritual conflict in the Wat Phra Dhammakāya movement and Charismatic Christian tradition would be a worthwhile research project. The study of such a topic might create an appropriate context for Buddhist–Christian dialogue.

Wat Phra Dhammakāya may increasingly find itself less at the margins of the life of the Thai *Saṅgha*, especially given the way it assists the *Mahā thera samakom*. On the other hand, this wealthy, pro-establishment movement has many influential members both in business and politics. It is, therefore, quite possible that the media spotlight will shine again on Wat Phra Dhammakāya. Currently Wat Phra Dhammakāya is on expansion mode. As already mentioned, they are planning to host a meeting for 1 million people at the temple in 2007. The use of *Dhammakāya* meditation in bringing together Buddhists from different traditions and reaching out to non-Buddhists is something which we may expect to hear more of. Research into the results of these initiatives to extend the influence of the temple will lead us to a greater understanding of the Wat Phra Dhammakāya movement.

It would appear that there is a perceived cultural vacuum in contemporary Thai society. This has been evidenced in the enormously successful recent release of *Homrong* ('The Overture'), a cheaply produced film about a *ranat* player in Thailand.[10] The film succeeds in reminding the Thai viewer of some of the country's history and culture. If people (particularly the young) currently adrift on a sea of cultural syncretism begin to search for the roots of their cultural identity, they may well find the Santi Asoke movement attractive. Its non-alignment with the Thai *Saṅgha* and strong focus on Thai traditions hold out potential identity. Asoke's rigorous practice, however, will prevent it becoming a significantly larger movement.

APPENDIX ONE

Research methodology

The *emic* (insiders') stage of the phenomenological model – (stages one to seven)[1]

Cox understands phenomenology of religion to be a step-by-step method of the study of religion which he outlines (1992:24–38). He views his model as a set of guiding principles rather than a precise instrument and would wish to engage with the milieu of the religion being studied.[2] My approach is similar to Cox's model up to stage seven. As Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke are similar in many respects to mainstream Thai Buddhism, I have no need to construct a complex model in order to compare phenomena between a variety of religious communities. The last stage (stage eight, referred to as the *etic* or outsiders' stage) is where the sociological/cultural theories and typologies of new movements are analysed.

Perform epochē *(i.e. suspend judgement)*

Previous opinions about the movements based on talking with those who have worked in the field and reading are bracketed out. As a researcher from out with the movements, I sought to express respect for that which was important to them, while at the same time not giving the impression I was a 'convert', or potential *convert*.

Perform empathetic interpolation

My research activities involved me in being present as an observer at a large number of ceremonies. While developing empathy with the members of the movements I researched, I sought to allow the data to speak for itself and interpolate what being part of these religious communities must feel like for members.

Maintain epochē

I found that I needed to be careful not to let an attitude or practice present in one of the movements influence a perspective on a parallel belief/practice in the other movement. For example Santi Asoke was very welcoming and open while the

officials at Wat Phra Dhammakāya were closed and suspicious of me during my initial contacts.[3] The retaining of a critical distance while remaining empathetic to both movements is vital during the research process.

Describe the phenomena

By being part of these communities, (particularly Santi Asoke who allowed me to live with them and participate fully in their activities in a number of locations) I was able to gain a sensitive understanding of the communities through: observation; listening to conversations and discussions with practitioners and participation in various activities. For example, I would ask members why they used a particular phrase, trying to understand the underpinning belief or motive. My focus was on deviations from standard Thai Theravāda beliefs and practice, so standard activities were thus not described.

Name the phenomena

I initially wondered if following stages five and six of Cox's model was necessary, given the many similarities of these two movements to mainstream Thai Buddhism. I decided that it would extend the opportunity to examine the phenomena and so I placed the data into the following categories: religious vocabulary, rituals, models of meditation and spiritual development, appeal (or non-appeal) for offerings to support the movement, approach to economics, administrative structures and aesthetics.[4]

Describe relationships and processes

The traditional phenomenologist notes the interconnection between the various categories at this stage. 'Myths for example, are often related to rituals; myths form the context for ritual activities and rituals bring myths into the present experience of believers' (Cox, 1992:33). In my research on Wat Phra Dhammakāya, for example, there were connections between categories of Buddhist doctrine (*karma*), appeal for funds, approach to economics and rituals. A modification of that relationship could also be observed within a period of two years, probably in response to media allegations of a 'hard sell' fund-raising approach. Cox has a further three stages in his model.[5] I did not see benefits in including these stages as I was researching only two movements, both variations of Thai Buddhism, whereas Cox has in mind the need to compare a number of movements from different contexts.

Explain the movement from an **emic** *perspective*

At this stage, a researcher taking a phenomenological approach would hope that there would be a good deal of resonance between his understandings of the

movement and the opinion of insiders. Despite respect for members of a movement and their practice, it is possible not to gain adequate 'inside' knowledge to sufficiently appreciate aspects of the movement, for example, the role of images in worship. Some excellent mentoring by two Santi Asoke male members and the openness of monastic and lay members from a wide range of backgrounds contributed to achieving, what I consider to be, a good understanding of Santi Asoke. Wat Phra Dhammakāya were less forthcoming than Santi Asoke about their practices. They had just passed through a period of intense, negative media coverage and were suspicious of outsiders wishing to gather information. There are areas in which Wat Phra Dhammakāya practice is harder for an outsider to understand than that of Santi Asoke, for example, the effect various images and *stūpas* (*cetiyas*) have on members. I think, therefore, that my insider's perspective on the Asoke movement is more complete than that of my understanding of Wat Phra Dhammakāya. At this point in the research I began to examine the possible ways the sociological and cultural forces may have shaped these movements. That is, I gathered and engaged with *etic* (outsiders' views). This is described in the next stage.

The *etic* (outsiders') stage of the phenomenological model (stage eight)

Analyse and critique theories and typologies that have or may be used to describe the two movements

I took the theories that scholars in the field had put forward in an attempt to classify and explain Santi Asoke and Wat Phra Dhammakāya.[6] In addition, I discussed some new possibilities, for example, Santi Asoke as an 'ascetic/prophetic', utopian and nomian (legalistic) movement, and Wat Phra Dhammakāya as a millenarian movement.[7] I also identified a number of striking similarities between Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Sōka Gakkai (a New Buddhist Movement which originated in Japan). Part of the criteria used in the evaluation of the theories are the responses of the members to these suggestions. It seems inappropriate not to ask members to respond to theories outsiders have used to describe them. Thus, *emic* and *etic* understandings are compared for resonance and dissonance. Typologies used in the classification of sects were also applied to Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke. Special reference was made to the ideas of Glock and Stark (1965:185–250) who discuss perceived deprivation in a particular area and how aspirations may be achieved. Members of a new movement may feel disadvantaged in comparison to society in general in one, some, or all of the following:

- Economic deprivation;
- Social deprivation;
- Organismic deprivation (due to physical or mental deformities. A healing movement may be rendered ineffective through medical discoveries);

- Ethical deprivation (where individuals or a group witness a constant failing of society to reach its moral standards);
- Psychic deprivation (where people find themselves without an adequate 'world view' to understand and organise their lives) (Barnard and Burgess, 1996:333; Glock and Stark, 1965: 246–50).

Roy Wallis' (2003:36–58) typologies of world rejecting, world accommodating and world affirming were also examined. Wilson's typology is wider reaching and also proved helpful. His seven types are: conversionist, revolutionist, introversionist, manipulationist, thaumaturgical, reformist and utopianist (Barnard and Burgess, 1996:332; Wilson, 1967:22–33; Wilson, 1973:18–30).[8]

Reflecting on developments within Southern Buddhism in the nineteenth and twentieth century, Lance Cousins (1997:408–11) has identified certain trends. They also were examined, and are

- Reformism: 'the general aim of such groups is closer conformity to the ideals of the early *Saṅgha*'. This is not a new phenomenon;
- 'Ultimatism': taking 'what is true from the viewpoint of ultimate truth or at an advanced level of spiritual practice as if it were the whole of Buddhism';
- Buddhist Modernism: trends such as the development of lay organisations and the introduction of some customs and values based upon Christian practices;
- Esotericism in Southern Buddhism: may also be termed as Theravāda Tantrism;
- Meditation revival: there has been a marked increased in lay Buddhists practicing meditation.

Analysis using such categories was done after fieldwork was completed and I was unable to enter into discussions with members regarding my findings.

As already mentioned in the main text, I also tried to define how these movements work (and attract new members) by examining how their leadership functions in terms of accepted Thai qualities of leadership, namely, power (*amnāt*), influence (*ittiphon*) and moral goodness (*pāramī*).

APPENDIX TWO

Analysis of the Santi Asoke questionnaire

A Questionnaire on achieving *nibbāna* (english translation)

The purpose of this questionnaire is to gain an understanding of what Santi Asoke members think a person needs to do in order to progress and eventually achieve *nibbāna*.

1. What practices do you engage in so that you progress and achieve *nibbāna*? Please list these in order of importance.

   a.
   b.
   c.
   d.
   e.

2. What is the most important practice you engage in to progress and achieve *nibbāna*? In what ways has this practice helped you?

3a. Please indicate what you consider to be your most important practice. If you were to write some things about the benefit of this practice what would you write?

3b. Why did you start this practice? Who advised you to start?

3c. Why do you feel this practice is more useful than the other practices you mentioned?

3d. How long have you been engaging in this particular practice?

4. What advice would you give to someone who wished to achieve *nibbāna*?

5. How long have you been a member of this movement?

6. What attracted you to become a member of this movement?

Please tick the appropriate boxes:

❑ male
❑ female

Age

- ❑ 18–25
- ❑ 26–40
- ❑ 40–50
- ❑ 51 or over

Please indicate your occupation.
Thank you very much for co-operating in this research by completing the questionnaire.

Rory Mackenzie

Aim of the questionnaire

This questionnaire was prepared in Thailand to be used with both Santi Asoke and Wat Phra Dhammakāya members. I originally intended to focus on practices which members believed facilitated spiritual development and ultimately led to *nibbāna*. On my second field trip (2001), Wat Phra Dhammakāya were under intense media scrutiny. Civil and religious proceedings were in progress regarding the abbot's ownership of donated land. There was also much criticism regarding the movement's fund-raising activities and beliefs, particularly about *nibbāna*. Wat Phra Dhammakāya's Public Relations committee was understandably unhappy with my proposal to examine the temple's teaching on *nibbāna*. They refused to give me permission to research into that aspect of its belief system.

On my third field trip (2002), Wat Phra Dhammakāya members were open to me visiting the temple and carrying out some research. The media spotlight had moved from the temple partly as a result of Phra Dhammachayo's stepping down from his position as abbot and being replaced by his deputy. Despite increased openness at Wat Phra Dhammakāya, I considered it inappropriate to distribute questionnaires at the temple. Thus the comparing of the movement's different approaches to spiritual development is not possible in the way I had intended.

Method

I wished to give responders the opportunity to respond to my questions according to their experience, and decided that a 'free text' qualitative approach best suited this aim.

I designed the questionnaire in the field and some of the language was modified by a Thai national.

Considerable effort was put into cross-checking by asking a number of questions in slightly different ways. The purpose of this was to establish the consistency of the answers, and thus the reliability of the instrument. Congruence was looked for in the responses to the following clusters of questions: Q1, Q2, Q3a; Q3a, Q3c, Q4 and Q3b (second part) and Q6.

The questionnaire was examined by several Santi Asoke monastics, including Bodhirak. No modifications were suggested, and I was permitted to distribute the questionnaire at the 2001 *Puttha Pisek* retreat at Phai Sali (some 300 kilometres north of Bangkok). Bodhirak asked me to introduce myself in Thai at a meeting and explain my research objectives. A *samaṇa* then announced that those prepared to cooperate should take a questionnaire, complete it and return it to the information centre. 94 questionnaires were taken and 62 returned – a response rate of 66%.

Considerable effort was put into cross-checking by asking a number of questions in slightly different ways. The purpose of this was to establish the consistency of the answers, and thus the reliability of the instrument. Congruence was looked for in the responses to the following clusters of questions: Q1, Q2, Q3a; Q3a, Q3c, Q4 and Q3b (second part) and Q6.

We now move on to the results. The following conventions have been used – questions are in bold type, categories have been underlined, and I have put my comments regarding responses to questions in italics.

Results

Q1. What practices do you engage in so that you progress and achieve *nibbāna*? Please list these in order of importance (1 to 5).

Develop moral behavior 65 out of a total of 284[1] responses (22.9%)
Keep the Precepts 59 responses (20.8%)
Reduce cravings and attachments 59 responses (20.8%)
Have good friends and be part of a supportive community 19 (6.7%)
The importance of having morally upright friends who will support them in their practice is very important to Asoke members. The world outside the Asoke communities is a difficult place in which to practice Buddhist teachings in a rigorous manner.
Have a vegetarian diet 18 responses (6.3%)
Develop self-awareness 13 responses (4.6%)
Follow the Eightfold Path 10 responses (3.5%)
Pursue wisdom 8 responses (2.8%)
Get rid of The Six Bad Habits 5 responses (1.8%)[2]
Develop a right understanding 5 responses (1.8%)
Unclear response 12 responses (4.2%)

Q2. What is the most important practice you engage in to progress and achieve *nibbāna*? In what ways has this practice helped you?

Being a vegetarian 37.1% of responders (n = 23)
Reducing cravings 24.2% of responders (n = 15)
Keeping the Precepts 16.1% of responders (n = 10)
Being self-aware 4.8% of responders (n = 3)
Cultivating morality 4.8% of responders (n = 3)
Understanding the Dhamma 3.2% (n = 2)

Cultivating wisdom 1.6% of responders (n = 1)
Question not answered, or answer unclear 8.1% of responders (n = 5)
The most interesting response to this question is that 23 responders cited vegetarianism as their most important practice. (In some of these cases more than one practice was cited. In these cases the response was credited as an indication of vegetarian practice.) 36% of all male responders and 39.5% of all female responders cited vegetarianism in this response. It would appear that a vegetarian diet and the compassion to animals associated with it increases compassion to all beings and improves physical health. 21 responders to Q1. cited vegetarianism as one of the 5 practices they engaged in. All Asokans would view the First Precept (I undertake a rule of training to abstain from harming living being) as implying a vegetarian, or more accurately a vegan diet. Implicit then in an Asokan's response of keeping the Precepts is the understanding of non-involvement in any activity which might result in the taking of any form of life.

Q3a. Please indicate what you consider to be your most important practice. If you were to write some things about the benefit of this practice what would you write?

71% of responders (n = 44) indicated more than one practice. The figures are cited below:

One practice 25.8% of responders (n = 16)
Two practices 17.4% of responders (n = 17)
Three practices 15% of responders (n = 15)
Four practices 16.1% of responders (n = 10)
Five practices 1.6% (n = 1)
Six practices no responders
Seven practices 1.6% (n = 1)
Unclear 3.2% of responders (n = 2)

The fact that 71% of responders indicated more than one practice may indicate that Asoke members engage in a variety of practices and are unable to cite just one practice. Different practices have different functions and complement each other.
No clear response emerged from those responders who cited only one practice. Getting rid of addictions, defilements and lusts and developing insight were the two main categories identified.

Q3b. Why did you start this practice? Who advised you to start?

Direct influence of an Asoke monastic, member, or a family member 48.4% of responders (n = 30)
It initially appears that the importance of personal contact is flagged up by almost half of the respondents, suggesting that they had been advised to commence a particular practice by a member of the movement (or in a few

cases someone who was familiar with it). Members are keen to take their contacts to meet Bodhirak if he is available. Indeed, 53.3% (n = 16) of the responders who mentioned the personal influence of an Asoke member or family member mentioned Bodhirak [3] *as the one who advised them to take up the practice they cited.*

12.5% of male responders (n = 3) cited Bodhirak as the person who advised them to start the particular practice. 34.2% of female responders (n = 13) identified Bodhirak as the person who advised them to commence the practice they identified. These female responders had been in membership for 16.5 years (14.2 years was the average overall length of membership of responders).

<u>Through reading the movement's literature and listening to teaching tapes</u> 21% of responders (n = 13)

The Santi Asoke member tends to be studious and values education. The Fah Apai Press produces a variety of good quality books, booklets, newsletters and leaflets at extremely low prices. It is hardly surprising that 21% of those who responded were influenced by literature or teaching tapes.

<u>Freedom from suffering</u> 13% of responders (n = 8)

<u>Specifically indicated Santi Asoke's teaching or practice</u> 6.5% of responders (n = 4)

<u>Listening to the movement's local radio station</u> 3.2% of responders (n = 2)

<u>Nothing in common with the above, or each other</u> 8% of the responses (n = 5)

Q3c. Why do you feel this practice is more useful than the other practices you mentioned?

The responses of those who cited one practice were examined and categorised as follows:

<u>It leads away from suffering</u> 37.5% of responders (n = 6)

<u>Convinced by personal experience</u> 31.25% of responders (n = 5)

<u>Teaching</u> 12.5% (n = 2)

<u>It focuses on different aspects of enlightenment</u> 6.25% of responders (n = 1)

<u>It overcomes my lusts</u> 6.25% of responders (n = 1)

Q3d. How long have you been engaging in this particular practice?

For 84% of the responders (n = 52), membership of the movement and practising according to the practices described was the same time. For 3.2% of responders (n = 2) membership of the movement differed from practicing by more than 2 years. 11.3% of responders (n = 7) indicated that length of membership exceeded practice (normally by 1 year). *This may reflect the time taken to adjust to the rigorous Asoke lifestyle*. The three occurrences where practice exceeded membership *may indicate a person putting Asoke teaching into practice prior to joining the movement.*

Q4. What advice would you give to someone who wished to achieve nibbana?

<u>Develop a serious approach to good practice</u> 43.6% of responders (n = 27). This included four responses that specified vegetarian practice.

Nibbana was defined in terms of the absence of suffering. The advice was to seek to gain nibbana as this was the only way we could be liberated from suffering 21% of responders (n = 13)
Understand Buddhist teachings in general, birth and death, kamma and nibbana 9.7% of responders (n = 6)
Be a good example to others and influence them to aim for nibbana 8% of responders (n = 5)
Specific mention of following the Asoke way in order to achieve results 4.8% of responders (n = 3)
Nothing in common with each other or the categories mentioned above 12.9% of the responses (n = 8)

Q5. How long have you been a member of this movement?

The average membership was 14.2 years.
Questionnaires completed by those in membership for less than five years were compared to those who had been in membership for a longer period. The only discernible difference was in three out of nine cases only two practices were entered instead of a possible five. In every other response to Q1, five practices were mentioned.

Q6. What attracted you to become a member of this movement?

Direct influence of Santi Asoke members 42% of responders (n = 26)
Note the congruence between this response and Q3b (first response)
Teaching, or the practice of the movement 29% of responders (n = 18)
The apparent mismatch between this response and Q3b (response 4) may be accounted for by the response to Q3b (response 2) where the movement's teaching (which has a heavy focus on practice) is disseminated through literature.
Unclear responses/did not fall into a discernible category 16% of responders (n = 10)
Wished to be free from suffering 13% of responders (n = 8)
There is congruence here with Q3b (response 3)

Biographical details of interviewees

Gender

25 male (40.4%), 37 female (59.6%)

Age group

18–25: 4.8% (n = 3); 26–40: 27.4% (n = 17); 40–50: 37% (n = 23); over 51: 30.6% (n = 19)

Occupation

Temple volunteers 30.6% (n = 19); Undisclosed 22.6% (n = 14); Farmers 11.3% (n = 7); Civil Servants 11.3% (n = 7); Merchants 6.5%

(n = 4); Employees 6.5% (n = 4); Manual workers 3.2% (n = 2); Retired 3.2% (n = 2); Nurse 1.6% (n = 1); Student 1.6% (n = 1); Nutritionist 1.6% (n = 1).

Limitations

In order to ascertain the accuracy of the responses to the questionnaire, I asked the same questions in different ways. For example similarities would be looked for in the responses to Questions 2, 3a and 4. On reflection, this quest for cross-checking was unnecessary. Asoke members are proud of their belief and practices, and would wish to reveal rather than conceal their activities. The number of the questions lengthened the time taken for responders to complete the questionnaire and made collation and analysis all the more difficult.

The sample size of 62 respondents was small. The high-return (low 'hold-out') factor can be explained by respondents receiving, completing and returning the questionnaire at the residential retreat. Another contributing factor to the high return may have been the discussion amongst those attending the retreat regarding the questionnaire and myself. An even higher return may have been achieved if the questionnaire had been simpler to complete. It may well have been the case that some potential responders were kept from responding by their demanding duties during the retreat.

There was a good cross section of age (apart from the under 25s) and gender. There were comparatively few young people at the retreat apart from school-children and students of the Asoke higher education programme (*Mahālai Wang Chiwit*). Those in their late teens and early 20s appeared to be very active carrying out a variety of practical duties such as shifting equipment, public address and computer/administrative activities. It may have been that the under 25s did not feel they had the time for this exercise or were disinterested in the questionnaire.

A high percentage of the responders were temple dwellers (30.6%). Indeed, it may have been that a number of those who did not disclose occupation (22.6%) were also temple dwellers. It may be argued that the sample reflect those who are the most committed within the movement. On the other hand, Santi Asoke attracts people who are prepared to engage in serious, indeed extremely rigorous practice. There may be little difference between the temple-dweller's practice and the Asoke member (*yatitam*) who lives away from the temple.

As already mentioned, the original intention was to use the questionnaire to gather data regarding Wat Phra Dhammakāya's and Santi Asoke's approach to spiritual development. Comparative work was not possible due to not receiving permission from Wat Phra Dhammakāya. On reflection, it would have been useful to have used the questionnaire with a group of mainstream Thai Buddhists, as this would have helped placed the Asoke findings in context. For example, such a questionnaire, I believe, would have indicated very few citations of vegetarianism as a practice for spiritual development.

If I had to conduct the questionnaire again, I would redesign the questions as follows:

1. What do you understand by the term *nibbāna*? Is it a long-term aspiration for you, or a goal or state you expect to achieve within your lifetime? (This would serve to indicate the respondents' level of knowledge as well as providing important perspectives).
2. What key practices do you undertake in order to reach/achieve *nibbāna*?
3. Please indicate if there is *one* practice more important than any of the others you engage in, in your quest to reach/achieve *nibbāna*?
4. Why did you join Santi Asoke?
5. Who introduced you to the movement?
6. How long have you been a member of the movement?
7. Gender. (Please tick the appropriate box.)
   - ❑ Male
   - ❑ Female
8. Age. (Please tick the appropriate box.)
   - ❑ 18–25
   - ❑ 26–40
   - ❑ 40–50
   - ❑ over 51
9. Occupation

If you are a temple dweller, please indicate your status, for example, temporary or permanent guest, resident, *patepat*, *nak* or *krak*.

Conclusion

The most significant factor emerging from this questionnaire is 37.1% of responders (n = 23) cited vegetarianism as their most important practice (Question 2). 16.1% indicated (n = 10) keeping the Precepts as their main practice. As already mentioned, implicit in keeping the First Precept for the Asoke member is a vegetarian diet.

Almost half the responders indicated that they joined the movement through the influence of an Asoke member (Question 3b). In 26% of responses to this question (n = 16), Bodhirak is mentioned as being the person who advised the responder to start a particular practice. Members appear to be keen to bring visitors to meet with their leader. Bodhirak is clearly accessible to members and outsiders, despite his heavy schedule of meetings and teaching. This accessibility is in sharp contrast to Phra Dhammachayo reclusive lifestyle. One in eight men indicated being influenced by Bodhirak. One in every three women said they had been encouraged to take up a particular practice by Bodhirak. These female responders had been in membership for an average of 16.5 years. One perspective

on this statistic is these females may view Bodhirak as a male friend and protector. Thai men tend to respond less positively to authority figures.

21% of responders (n = 13) took up Asoke practice through reading the movement's literature and listening to teaching tapes (Question 3b). This points to the studious nature of Asoke members. Santi Asoke publish material 'in house' and sell this literature at the book shops located in their communities.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1 In Thailand the term '*Saṅgha*' refers to the Buddhist monastic order that is, Buddhist monks. Some traditions of Buddhism understand the term to mean the community of Buddhists, both lay and ordained.

2 Research on members of New Religious Movements uncover dissatisfactions with society and/or the religious system, as well as deprivations (real or imagined). These forces may be a growing trend and contribute to the future shape of society.

3 '*Lāte* communist' was used to describe the feared communist party. During the 1970s 'to be Thai is to be Buddhist' was a common slogan. The intention was to convince Thai people that believing in communism was incompatible with being Thai, as it was such a perceived threat to the nation.

4 The Pāli term 'Thammayutika' (Thai 'Thammayut'), meaning 'Order adhering to the *Dhamma*', was first used by Prince Mongkut (a monk from 1824–50, and later King Rama IV), to describe the order he founded. Thammayut distinguished the prince's new order from the older order, the 'Mahānikai' (Wyatt, 1984:176). The differences between the two groupings apply only to monks and not laity. 'Fraternity' appears to capture this concept better than 'denomination'.

5 Drawing from Larry Shiner 1967 'The Concept of Secularization in Empirical Research' pp.207–20 in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* Vol. 6, No. 2, Michael Hill (1973:228–50) mentions six different meanings of the term 'secularisation'. They are as follows:

1 The decline of religion where accepted symbols, doctrines and institutions lose their prestige and influence. This process will eventually terminate in a religion-less society.
2 The shift from 'other-worldly' to 'this-worldly' orientations *within* religious groups. Religious people in this case are motivated more by present circumstances rather than future life.
3 The disengagement of society from religion. Instead of religion's function being that of a primary source of legitimisation for the whole of society, it becomes increasingly a matter of private choice.
4 The transposition of beliefs and activities that were once thought of as having a divine point of reference to activities that have an entirely secular content.
5 The world is gradually deprived of its sacral character. Humanity increasingly discards a magical/superstitious understanding of its environment and embraces a scientific explanation. At the end of this process all mystery and superstition will be removed from this world.

6 Change from a sacred to a secular society. The sacred society is one where people are unable/unwilling to adjust to change. Secular society, in contrast, predisposes its members to welcome and respond to the culturally new.

6 The Thai word comes from the Pāli *loka*.
7 An *ubasok* is a male worker at the temple who keeps the Eight Precepts.
8 I often make the point that I am not a journalist but am seeking to understand the movement through the eyes of its adherents and in its wider social setting.
9 Essentially a lay movement based on the beliefs and practices of Nichiren Buddhism that developed from the 1930s onwards in Japan. Comparisons between Wat Phra Dhammakāya and the Fokuangshan Buddhist Order in Taiwan are also interesting.
10 Governor of Bangkok from 1985 to 1992.

REVIEW OF SCHOLARLY LITERATURE ON THE WAT PHRA DHAMMAKĀYA AND SANTI ASOKE MOVEMENTS

1 In the 15 years since Jackson wrote this chapter, Thai family affiliations with Thammayut or Mahānikai have become even more tenuous.
2 Bodhirak is the founder and current leader of the Santi Asoke movement.
3 Jackson does not mention farmers (who may have a reasonable amount of land) and government officers, for example, teachers. The Chinese background is very important as it highlights a history of marginalisation and a mentality that is disposed to commitment and hard work. While Jackson does not mention it, I understand it to be a key in understanding the Asoke *Weltanschauung*.
4 Anan Senakhan's outspoken stance is both complex and far reaching. A cultural conservative, he served as a police officer and was ordained as a monk in the Thammayut fraternity only to disrobe and attempt to prevent members of the armed forces and their supporters from undermining the democratic processes of government. Although a royalist, Anan spent four and a half years in prison on charges of *lēse-majēstie* (Jackson, 1989:189).
5 In *Political Change in Thailand: Democracy and Participation.*
6 'Fundamentalistic Movements in Theravāda Buddhism' pp.628–90 in M Marty and RS Appleby *Fundamentalisms Observed*.
7 The concept is that society is grouped around a centre. This centre is the royal domain and has as its focal point the royal temple. Each lesser unit in the galactic system is an imitation of the larger. Power is located at the centre and is used for the control of all within the system. The originator of the term, Stanley Tambiah, developed the concept in chapter seven of his *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*.
8 The temple and institute are located 94 kilometres south-west of Bangkok. The institute seeks to teach *Dhammakāya* meditation to monks, members and all those who express interest.
9 Feungfusakul's summarises her doctoral research in 1993b 'Empire of Crystal and Utopian Commune: Two Types of Contemporary Theravāda Reform in Thailand' *Sojourn* Vol. 8, No. 1, pp.153–83.
10 White is the colour in which people dress when keeping the Eight Precepts on holy days.
11 1998 'Sasanasat Kong Chum Chon Muang Samai Mi: Koruni Wat Phra Thammakaai' [Religious Understanding of Contemporary Urban Society – The Case Study of Wat Phra Thammakaai] *The Journal of Buddhist Studies* Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Vol. 5, No. 1, pp.41–67.
12 *Myth* is used in the technical sense of a 'legitimising story' and not intended to be pejorative. This information is important in helping us understand both the attraction of following Phra Dhammachayo (a saviour) and the purpose of Wat Phra

Dhammakāya. It was 'leaked' to Dr Feungfusakul by Phra Mettanando, a former monk at the temple (personal conversation in Chiang Mai on 18.9.02).

13 If a critical mass of meditators can be assembled, then the deluding and destructive forces of Black *Dhammakāya* may be halted. Indeed, if a sufficient number of meditators practise higher meditation and focus the generated power on the Black *Dhammakāya*, then the evil forces will be destroyed.

14 It was published by Abo Akademi University, Turku, Finland, the institute where she undertook her doctoral studies.

15 The title seems to reflect Asoke's approach to meditation: that is carrying out everyday tasks with mindfulness rather than having periods of sitting meditation (when the eyes are normally closed).

16 A reference to monastics with communist sympathies who were forced to leave the *Saṅgha*.

17 The 'Moral Force' Party.

18 In a personal conversation at Mahidol University on 1.2.01.

19 Wat Paknam, Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāyaram and Wat Phra Dhammakāya.

20 The temple is briefly described in Chapter 2 under 'The inception of the Dhammakāya Buddhist Meditation Foundation and Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāyaram.'

21 In some cases there has been a considerable delay between field work and publication.

1 SETTING THE SCENE: THE RELIGIOUS AND SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TWO MOVEMENTS

1 The prince's monastic name was Makuto Bhikkhu (Blofeld, 1972:15).

2 The prince believed that the water boundary (Pāli *upakkukhepa sīmā*) would function as a pure boundary.

3 In 1894, it was agreed that the Mon and Thammayut orders should be unified (Heinze, 1977:28).

4 This figure increases during the rainy season (Thai *phansa*) when young men on a 'one-off basis' ordain as monks for a three month period. Note also that on National Day in 1939, Phibun (Prime Minister from 1938 to 1944) announced that Siam was renamed Thailand [Thai *Prathet Thai*, meaning 'free country'] (Pongpaichit and Baker, 1997:260). The move was in keeping with the military leaders' desire to reclaim the land that rightly belonged to them but had been taken away by French and British powers.

5 'They also chose a new "second king" (*uparāja*), and appointed the chief among Mongkut's ministers, Chaophraya Si Suriyawong (Chuang Bunnag), to act as regent during the remaining five years of the young king's minority' (Wyatt, 1969:35).

6 The Chakri Dynasty commenced (with the move of the Siamese capital from Thonburi to Bangkok) in 1782 with King Rama I. The present monarch, King Bhumibol, also known as King Rama IX, is the ninth king of the Chakri Dynasty.

7 A younger half-brother of King Chulalongkorn who was ordained at the age of 20. Some three years later he passed the level five Pāli examinations and was appointed deputy leader of the Thammayut fraternity. He became the fraternity leader in 1894. According to Wyatt (1969:217) Prince Wachirayan had already founded seven schools in some of the Thammayut monasteries (independent of the Department of Education) prior to the king's request.

8 Wyatt (1984:217) notes how the Burmese *Saṅgha* resisted the drive to deliver a standard syllabus and reflects, 'The difference must be that the Siamese efforts had all the prestige and power of the indigenous ruling family and government behind them.'

9 Details of the drawing up and implementation of these plans, along with the results may be found in David K Wyatt 1969 *The Politics of Reform in Thailand: Education in the Reign of King Chulalongkorn*, chapter seven onwards.

10 These millenarian revolts are described in detail in Chapter 3. There were those who emerged in 1902, such as Thao Bucan and Man who were seen by the ordinary people as 'people with merit' *phu mi bun* and 'people with extraordinary powers' *phu wiset*. These men were viewed by the masses as delivers from poverty and oppression by those in authority. These millenarian movements were viewed as subversive by government and stamped out.

11 Around 92 per cent of the *Saṅgha* were in the Mahānikai fraternity, yet the minority Thammayut fraternity enjoyed more influence due to royal patronage. For example, from 1910 to 1951, three of the four Supreme Patriarchs belonged to the Thammayut fraternity.

12 The current monarch King Bhumibol (Rama IX) was king at that time, having ascended the throne in 1946.

13 King Bhumibol made around 400 public appearances per year during Sarit's time in office, as opposed to 100 visits in the pre-Sarit period.

14 Pāli *kaṭhina*, Thai *kathin* referred originally to a wooden frame on which a monk stretched cloth in order to make robes. Later the term was used of a robe that was made for a monk woven from raw cotton within a single day. *Kathin* robes are presented to monks at a ceremony which must take place within a lunar month after the end of *vassa*, Thai *phansa* (the three month rainy season in Thailand which ends on the full moon of the eleventh month) (Rajadhon, 1986:69).

15 *The Saṅgha Act of 1902* made no provision for the leadership role of the Supreme Patriarch. Ishii believes this partly to be due to the fact that there was no Supreme Patriarch when the Act was passed. Prince Wachirayan, although head of the Thammayut fraternity did not become Supreme Patriarch until 1910 (Ishii, 1986:118).

16 The Supreme Patriarch has enormous decision making powers, he is ex-officio the chairman of the Council of Elders, and is permitted to appoint from half to two thirds of the membership of the council. Sarit ensured that the government had the legal power to remove the Supreme Patriarch from office. This represents a remarkable intrusion of secular (military to be precise) authority into the religious domain.

17 One of the country's most respected monks from Udon Thani in the north-east of Thailand, and founder of the *Pha Pa Chuay Chat* (Donation to Help the Nation) (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2000:174).

18 Dean of one of the postgraduate sections of Mahāchulalongkorn University, Bangkok (personal email correspondence 17.11.03).

19 Discussions with Phra Bhavana Visuthikhun in Ratburi (12.3.01) and former monk and Thai culture specialist Dr Nantichai Mejung in Bangkok (3.9.02).

20 The name Buddhadāsa (Thai Putthathat) means ('servant of the Buddha'). The name should be prefixed with the title 'Phra', as Buddhadāsa is a monk. He tends to be referred to by his name without his title, although he is sometimes referred to as Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, or Than Putthathat.

21 It is partly for this reason Buddhadāsa has been selected for inclusion in this brief overview. Phra Payutto (whose current monastic title is Phra Dhammapiṭaka), an outstanding but more conservative scholar could just as easily been cited as a representative of contemporary Thai Buddhist scholarship.

22 The *dhutaṅgas* are a set of thirteen ascetic practices that Buddhist monks voluntarily undertake. Their purpose in each case is to counteract mental defilements. The forest tradition is sometimes referred to as the *Kammaṭṭhāna* tradition. The word means 'basis, or place of work', and describes the contemplation of certain meditation themes in order to uproot defilements, craving and ignorance from the mind.

23 Mahānikai monks were at that time obliged to participate in construction work around the temple and village ceremonies. Thammayut monks were not permitted to engage in these activities. This was to facilitate Pāli studies, not (as the early forest teachers thought) to create opportunity for extra meditation! (Tiyavanich, 1997:267).

24 In 1992, Phra Sumedho (referred to by his disciples as Luang Phaw Sumedho) was awarded the ecclesiastical title of Phra Sumedhachariya.

25 Buddhadāsa 'has a fondness for paradox and irony, being much influenced by the Zen School of Buddhism. And, as in Zen, Buddhadāsa often likes using language provocatively with the object of stimulating his audience to reconsider their customary views' (Jackson, 1988:115).

26 Donald Swearer (1989:2) comments that Buddhadāsa's 'influence extends beyond the confines of Suan Mokkh. The small collection of his writing given to me 30 years ago has expanded to the largest corpus of thought ever published by a single Theravāda thinker in the entire history of the tradition. For some years to come students of Thai Buddhism will be summarising, distilling and interpreting Buddhadāsa's contribution to Buddhist thought'.

27 Buddhadāsa, despite his radical teachings, has observed Thai monastic traditions and not been schismatic. In 1980 he received a honorary doctorate from the Mahāchulalongkorn Buddhist University, the first it presented in its 90 year existence. The degree was conferred by the Supreme Patriarch of the Thai *Saṅgha*.

28 This is discussed in Chapter 7.

29 'The students of these years, the first to benefit from the expansion of higher education, were the vanguard of the middle class' (Phongpaichit and Baker, 1998:234). They were inspired to some extent by the activities of students around the world who protested against the Vietnam War. The Thai students demonstrated against Japanese economic exploitation and America's military activities in the region. (Phongpaichit and Baker, 1997:305). The students were not the only group to participate. There were also a significant number of trade unionists protesting. These demonstrations were viewed as communist inspired and treacherous and resulted in a violent response from the military. Over 3,000 arrests were made and in 1976, 2,000–3,000 left Bangkok to join the Communist Party of Thailand.

30 'Right kill left' was part of right wing political rhetoric during this time. Sadly, a number of politically active members of the public (all with perceived left-wing sympathies) were assassinated. A number of pro-right wing movements were formed or utilised in the crackdown on pro-democracy protestors. The New Force movement or 'Nawaphon' was probably the best known. It recruited businessmen and officials and by late 1975 claimed a million members (Phongpaichit and Baker, 1997:307).

31 The Red Gaurs are known in Thai as 'Krathing Daeng', they were a right-wing vigilante group drawn from vocational students (facing an uncertain future during the economic downturn), as well as the unemployed and disaffected of the city. The Village Scouts were founded by the Border Patrol Police in 1971. In time, the movement gained popularity in Bangkok, where it became a 'high-society' expression of loyalty to the king and nation (Phongpaichit and Baker, 1997:308).

32 Sadly during the demonstrations some fifty people were killed by the military and paramilitary and around 700 civilians injured (500 were minor injuries). These are the government statistics; other sources estimate that there may have been several hundred casualties.

33 A key reason for this was the ability of China, Vietnam and Indonesia to undercut Thai manufacturers.

34 IMF's strategy was based on one designed for Latin America in the 1980s. Fieldwork by the IMF and the World Bank attempting to adapt the strategy for the Thai situation was hastily carried out (18 days fieldwork). This gave the impression that the foreign economists were not genuinely interested in Thailand (Pittaya cited by McCargo, 2001:102).

35 This is reflected in the three colours of the Thai flag. Red represents the blood of the Thai people (patriotism), white (purity) is symbolic of Buddhism, while blue stands for the monarchy.
36 King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit have four children. Ubonrat (5.4.51) resigned her royal status in order to marry an American, she subsequently divorced. HRH Crown Prince Mahā Vajiralongkorn (28.7.52) was installed as Crown Prince of Siam in 1972. He has studied in the UK, USA and completed military training in Australia. HRH Princess Mahā Chakri Sirindhorn (2.4.55) is unmarried and has extensively accompanied her father on official engagements. Princess Chulabhorn (4.7.57) is the fourth child. She married a commoner in 1982 and has recently gone through divorce proceedings (That-Pian, 2003:2001).
37 Penalties have been increased in recent years and few who are charged escape penalty (Hewison, 1997:60).
38 The highly politicised leadership of the armed forces was severely discredited by the May 1992 incident (Samudavanija, 1997:53). Due to relative security in Thailand and South-East Asia, the military have much less influence than they traditionally enjoyed. The return to significance for certain sections of the military might be to join forces with some who represent large business interests, and intervene in the democratic system.

2 THE INCEPTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE WAT PHRA DHAMMAKĀYA MOVEMENT

1 Derogatorily referred to as *puttha phanit* meaning 'Buddhist business'.
2 Luang Phaw means 'reverend father'. Paknam is the name of the temple, it means 'entrance to the water'; it is located near a canal off the River Chao Phraya which separates Thonburi from Bangkok.
3 Candasaro is a Pāli name meaning the one with a bright radiance like the moon. *Bhikkhu* is the Pāli term for a monk.
4 This *Sutta* was to become a key text in Luang Phaw Sot's approach to meditation and indeed is a classic text for much Theravāda meditation.
5 Also known as Wat Po, a famous Bangkok tourist attraction because of the image of the reclining Buddha and the school of traditional Thai massage.
6 Pāli is taught up to grade nine in the *Saṅgha* and this normally requires nine years full time study to achieve. After achieving grade three a monk is given the title Phra mahā.
7 There was a shift away from free translation to a more grammatical approach and the oral exams became written assessments.
8 The *Satipaṭṭhāna* method may well have been used by the Buddha; it is much stressed in the Pāli Canon. Wat Phra Dhammakāya members claim that this was the case and that Luang Phaw Sot also discovered the method meditating by himself.
9 Monks are required to spend the rainy season [known as *phansa*] at a temple. This is to prevent damage to newly planted crops by their wandering round the countryside. *Phansa* is a time when temple activities are practised by the monks in a more intense manner.
10 *Sammā Arahaṃ* means the 'righteous Absolute of Attainment which a human being can achieve'.
11 Sot viewed a contribution to the building of these rooms as an act of great merit. On announcing his plan to construct these buildings, one supporter offered to pay for the entire project. Sot refused saying that 'it must be a collective effort because sponsoring even a single plank or a single nail for the building of the workshop would bring incalculable merit day and night, as the workshop had been built in order to bring an end to *saṃsāra*' (Dhammakāya Publications, 1998:94).

12 Although Māra is spoken of many times in the *suttas*, monks are reluctant to discuss the topic viewing it as unnecessary, perhaps even dangerous.
13 As a *deva*, Māra has a mind-made body which, unlike that of a human being is not born of a father and mother. He is self-luminous, long-lived, does not cast a shadow, and like Satan, is capable of deeds far beyond the powers of man. (Boyd, 1976:150). Māra, although a *deva*, is subject to change, sorrow and death, and will reap the fruit of his *karma* (Boyd, 1976:152).
14 Mr Lek, at Wat Phra Dhammakāya on 25.8.02.
15 I know one PhD student in Edinburgh, an ardent Wat Phra Dhammakāya follower, who travelled regularly from Edinburgh to the Wat Phra Dhammakāya centre in London, for the first Sunday of the month meeting. At 02:30 on Sunday mornings the small group connect to the temple in Thailand and join in meditation with over 20,000 temple members.
16 *Yai* is the term used for a person's mother's mother. 'Khun Yai' then is a term of respect for an old lady. *Dhammakāya* members refer to Chan Khonnokyuung as Khun Yai Chan.
17 Professor Sathiangphong, Rachabandit in an interview in his office on 19.2.01.
18 In response to the question 'Why target Bangkok at all?' Phra Mettānando replies that at that time there was a large presence of Japanese troops in Thailand, and the wiping out of these troops through atomic warfare would cause the Japanese government to lose heart and surrender. Luang Phaw Sot, it is maintained, knew of this through his mental powers and directed his meditators to focus their power on those responsible for the operation to alter their target.
19 Interview with Khun Lek (not his real name) on 11.2.01.
20 Why did Luang Phaw Sot not recognise that Hitler was on the same side as Māra? It may have been that the atrocities committed by the Germans were not reported in Thailand. A number of senior Thai military officers were pro-German, having received training there. Indeed, there was a fascist component within the Thai government of the time. It viewed the Chinese in Thailand as 'worse than the Jews' (Phongpaichit and Baker, 1997:258).
21 A *sāmaṇera* is a novice monk and is ordained on The Ten Precepts. These include the Five Precepts that any Buddhist should observe; however, the third Precept is changed from abstaining from the wrong indulgence in sensual pleasures to abstaining from any form of sexual indulgences. The five extra disciplines are refraining from eating after midday, refraining from attending places of entertainment, refraining from adorning the body, for example, use of jewellery or perfumes, refraining from sleeping on a luxurious bed, and lastly, refraining from handling or possessing money, or storing wealth of any kind. Full ordination, that is ordination as a *bhikkhu*, requires the monk to abide by the monastic code of the *vinaya*, which has 227 disciplines to observe.
22 *Vaisakha* is the celebration of the birth of Gotama, and also his enlightenment 35 years later, as well as his *parinibbāna* (death, or passing into final *nibbāna*) at the age of 80.
23 *Anusavanācāriya* and the *karmavācāriya* (Sanskrit) are the two monks who assist the preceptor at a monk's ordination (*upasampadā*).
24 *Vijjā* (knowledge) *Dhammakāya*, this is the transcendental wisdom and higher knowledge gained by those practising *vipassanā* beyond the attainment of *Dhammakāya*.
25 Thai *kut*, Pāli *kuti* is a very basic shelter (often only a roof with no walls). This is the traditional dwelling place for a monk or nun.
26 Phra Rajyanvisith formerly held the ecclesiastic title of Phra Visuthikhun. Prior to that he was referred to as Phra Jayamanggalo, before his ordination he was known as Achan (title given to a teacher or lecturer) Sermchai.
27 One acre is equivalent to 2.5 *rai*.
28 As already pointed out, it was Luang Phaw Sot who is believed to have recovered this lost meditative technique.

29 Wat Saket is also known as the Golden Mountain Temple. It is located in the centre of Bangkok.
30 Now referred to by members as Luang Phaw Dhammachayo. His ecclesiastical title is Phra Phrarajbhavanavisudh.
31 Interview at Wat Phra Dhammakāya on 25.8.02.
32 Founded in 1896, this university serves the educational needs of Mahānikai monks and is situated in the grounds of Wat Mahātat in central Bangkok.
33 Now referred to as Luang Phaw Dattacheewo. His ecclesiastical title is Phra Bhavanaviriyakhun.
34 *Ubasok* (Pāli *upāsaka*) and *ubasika* (Pāli *upāsikā*) are committed to keeping the Eight Precepts; like the monks they eat only two meals a day and not after lunchtime. They rise at 4 am for meditation practice. Many of the men aspire to monastic ordination and view this period as a time of training and opportunity to serve the temple through conducting its business.
35 *Phansa* is the three-month Buddhist lent period which runs concurrently with the rainy season. During this time monks remain within their monasteries as much as possible and heighten their spiritual practice. This tradition goes back to the time of the Buddha who restricted his followers from travelling so as to prevent damage to newly planted crops.
36 The guide who showed me round the complex in September 1998 indicated that Phra Dhammachayo who designed the *bot* wanted a structure that would be easy and inexpensive to maintain.
37 108 is an auspicious number in Buddhism.
38 Due to the economic crisis in the region from 1997 onwards there was grave financial hardship for the Thai people due to the collapse of the economy.
39 A male lay followers' (*upāsakaratanam*) retreat also exists to commemorate Father's day, which is held around the time of the king's birthday (5 December).
40 According to Feungfusakul, almost fifty Buddhist societies in higher education had student leaders who were members of Wat Phra Dhammakāya. She writes 'Most of the temporary unpaid lay volunteers are high school, college or university students who are drawn either through the Buddhist clubs of their educational institutions or through the former participation in Wat Phra Dhammakāya's public moral training program' (Feungfusakal, 1993:85).
41 King Mongkut's Institute of Technology, Ladkrabang, just outside Bangkok, on 15.2.00
42 *Dhammadāyāda* is a Pāli word meaning 'heir of the *Dhamma*'.
43 Known in Thai as a '*klot*'.
44 Female students are allowed on this programme but are not candidates for ordination.
45 White is symbolic of purity in the Thai context, for example, in the Thai flag white represents Buddhism. Some Buddhists will wear white on holy days as they go to the temple.
46 Khun Yai Chan passed away on 10 September 2000 due to natural causes. She was 91 years of age. Her official title is now Khun Mahāratana Upāsikā Chandra Khonnokyoong.
47 This is a practice that the abbot developed prior to his ordination. It was considered to be an ancient ceremony that had long ago fallen into disuse. It attracted the attention of many young people during the time when Khun Yay Chan mentored her group of students at Wat Paknam. On the following Sunday (11.2.00) an elderly lady justified the practice to me by saying that many at Wat Phra Dhammakāya had travelled through the power of meditation to *nibbāna* and there seen countless Buddhas. She pointed out that each person invariably described the same thing.
48 Members understand this terrace as an expression of their devotion to the *Saṅgha*, the third component of the Triple Gem. Please refer back to the diagram of the Dhammakāya Cetiya.

49 Senator Pong Leng-ee, representing disciples of Khun Yai Chan made a petition to the abbot to postpone the cremation ceremony until the construction of the Dhammākaya Cetiya was completed. The abbot and the committee of monks 'confirmed the fact that all disciples have become more enthusiastic in meditation and practise of the *Dhamma*. Thus, the rescheduling of the cremation ceremony will surely result in the intensified spiritual development of all disciples. Consequently, the announcement of the ceremony postponement was formally made' (www.dhammakāya.th.org 28.3.01). The cremation ceremony took place on 3 February 2002. Senior monks from 30,000 Buddhist temples throughout Thailand and from twenty other countries were present.

50 That evening a member described the conflict that there often is in making a donation. There is initial reluctance to give and a sense of joy in handing the donation over. The joy partly comes about through the triumph of conquering self and selfishness.

51 This took place at the temple on 25.8.02 and lasted for an hour.

52 Phra Nicholas is a British monk who has been a monk at Wat Phra Dhammakāya for 15 years ('rains').

53 In an interview in Bangkok on 28.9.02, a Buddhist academic (whose identity I do not wish to reveal) indicated that this was simply another example of Wat Phra Dhammakāya using a term in an unusual manner in order to attract interest to the movement.

54 One acre is approximately 2.5 *rai*.

55 The female expression of Avalokiteśvara 'The Lord Who Looks Down With Compassion'. Known in Chinese as Guan Yin, see Harvey, 1990:131 for discussion.

56 The Bodhisatta who will be the Buddha of the next age.

57 *Soi Suan Phlu* is the street in which the former prime minister lived.

58 Chavalit Yongchaiyudh (who later served as prime minister) was deputy chairman of the ceremony and was pictured in a meditative pose on that occasion.

59 This was King Bhumibol's sixth 12-year cycle and a particularly auspicious occasion.

60 In an interview at his newspaper office in Bangkok on 19.2.01.

61 This is correct but the general understanding is a monk should own only a few very basic possessions.

62 Interview with Phra Nicholas on 27.8.02 at Wat Phra Dhammakāya.

63 Interview with Phra Nicholas on 27.8.02 at Wat Phra Dhammakāya

64 Phra Santikaro is an American monk based at Suan Mokk, in South Thailand. He was a disciple of the late Buddhadāsa.

3 AN ANALYSIS OF THE WAT PHRA DHAMMAKAYA MOVEMENT

1 *Phra nai* are monks who have taken a lifetime vow. *Phra nok* (outside monks) are those who have not taken lifetime vows, and are free to leave at any time (*Bangkok Post,* 21.12.98).

2 The Ten Virtues (or things that should be practised continually in order to gain *pāramī*) are: *dāna* (generosity and giving); *sīla* (morality, good conduct); *nekkhamma* (renunciation); *paññā* (wisdom, insight or understanding); *viriya* (energy, effort, endeavour); *khanti* (forbearance, tolerance, endurance); *sacca* (truthfulness); *adhiṭṭhāna* (resolution, self-determination); *mettā* (loving-kindness, friendliness); *upekkhā* (equanimity, indifference to praise and blame in the performance of duty) (*Dictionary of Buddhism*, 2000:284).

3 Jackson (1999:267) translates Thai writer Nithi Aevosrivongse as follows: 'King Chulalongkorn amulets and images are associated with "improving commerce" and making you loved and trusted by people who meet you, so you can conduct your business undertakings successfully' (Nithi, 1993:31) translated and quoted by Jackson, 1999:267.

4 At Wat Phra Dhammakāya on 1.9.02. 'It is customary for Thai monks to end their sermons with blessings for happiness (*kwam-suk*) and prosperity (*kwam jarern*)' (Jackson, 1999:263).

5 In an interview in Chiang Mai on 18.9.02.
6 Literally the term means 'a descent' and suggests the idea of a deity coming down from heaven to earth. The literal meaning also implies a certain diminution of the deity when he or she assumes the form of an *Avatāra* (Kinsley, 1987:14).
7 The meaning of the word is unclear in this context. It carries the idea of primordial force within which is both good and evil. This does not resonate with the movement's understanding of *Dhammakāya* as buddha-nature (see discussion in Chapter 4), and is a topic for future research.
8 'Myth' is used in the technical sense of a story concerning an explanation of spiritual power, particularly as it relates to our world.
9 In an interview at Wat Phra Dhammakāya on 27.8.02. *The Matrix* was directed by Andy and Larry Wachowski, Warner:1999. *The Matrix Reloaded*, second of a trilogy, was released in 2003. See article by R Corliss in *Time* 12.5.03, pp.53–61 for a helpful overview of the film.
10 A temple member currently undertaking doctoral research in London. This interview took place in Bangkok in September 2006.
11 In an interview at Wat Paknam on 19.02.01.
12 In an interview at Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāyaram on 12.3.01. The monk did, however, point out that those who achieved high levels of ability in *Dhammakāya* meditation could do miraculous deeds.
13 In an interview at Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāyaram on 12.3.01.
14 11.2.01 at Wat Phra Dhammakāya. The lay man, a friend of Phra Dattacheewo, went to the acting abbot's accommodation and returned with a booklet written by Phra Dattacheewo entitled *Buddhist Ways to Overcome Obstacles*. Phra Dattacheewo takes the view that by the word Māra 'the Buddha meant the obstacles in our way of life and work' (p.15). These five groups of temptation are 1) *Kilesa* māra – worldly desires which give a man a bad nature and make him do bad things. 2) *Khandha* māra – physical or mental defects which may cause men to behave in a self-consuming way. 3) *Abhisangkhara* māra – a past, bad behaviour that becomes a label following a man and continually damaging him. 4) *Dhevabutt* māra – disciples of temptation such as gangsters and bad people obstructing us in our work, or preventing us from doing good. 5) *Machu* māra – death, putting an end of our chance of doing good (p.17).
15 Mr Lek at Wat Phra Dhammakāya on 25.8.02.
16 The three *Dhammakāya* meditation practising movements are Wat Paknam, Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakayāram and Wat Phra Dhammakāya.
17 Interview at Wat Phra Dhammakāya on 4.2.01. Mr Lek indicated that people still brought pictures to the abbot who through the power of meditation was able to absorb them into his body, resulting in possible healing.
18 *Makha Bucha* (Thai) commemorates the occasion when the Buddha allegedly gave the *pāṭimokkha* to a gathering of 1,250 *Arahats*. Tradition has it that the *Arahats* were not informed in advance of the meeting but because of their enlightened state knew the meeting was going to take place; they all came together at the same time. In Thailand the commemoration takes place in February. The *pāṭimokkha* is the 227 rules of monastic discipline/training found in the *Vinaya Piṭaka*. It is chanted by monks on observance days which fall on the full and new moons.
19 Those who practice *Dhammakāya* meditation testify of greater ability to concentrate. This has a positive knock-on effect for business. Members say it also leads to improved stress management and brings a sense of peace.
20 The temple at Putthamonthon (on the western outskirts of Bangkok) was originally constructed for this purpose but the space is now used as a permanent display of the history of Buddhism.
21 The *Lotus Sūtra* is understood by Nichiren Buddhists and Sōka Gakki members (as well as others within the Mahāyāna tradition) as a sermon preached by Shakyamuni.

'Most western scholars would regard it as originating considerably later, possibly around 250CE' (Chryssides, 1999:215). In this *sūtra*, the Buddha teaches that he became enlightened countless *eons* ago. Since that time, he has constantly been teaching in this world system and countless others in appropriate forms (Harvey, 1990:125). This Primordial or *Ādi* Buddha is regarded by Nichiren and Sōka Gakkai members as Nichiren, and thus Nichiren Daishonin (*daishonin* or 'great sage') assumes greater importance than the historic Buddha (Chryssides, 1999:215).

22 The other practice is the recitation of part of chapter two (*Hoben*) and the whole of chapter sixteen (*Juryo*). Sōka Gakkai members believe that these writings contain the essence of the *Lotus Sūtra* and indeed all of the Buddha's teaching. These writings are chanted according to a phonetic script. Comprehension is not required in order to gain full benefit from the practice and prayer beads are fingered during the ritual which may last 30 minutes (Mackenzie, 1995b:14).

23 At Wat Phra Dhammakāya on 1.9.03.

24 British historian, Arnold Toynbee is such an example. He was invited to Japan as a guest of Ikeda and Ikeda used the videoing of the meeting to give the impression that Toynbee approved of him and his activities. According to Polly Toynbee (the historian's daughter), this was not the case, and in fact, her father hardly knew Ikeda (BBC Television documentary on Sōka Gakkai 1995).

25 This is true for all three Dhammakāya movements, that is, Wat Paknam, Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāyaram and Wat Phra Dhammakāya. Yet it appears that Wat Phra Dhammakāya is the only movement with a global vision and strategy.

26 In an interview on 26.8.02 at Wat Phra Dhammakāya.

27 Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand, America, Belgium, France, Germany, Denmark and Spain. There is the intention to open a centre in the Middle East as there are already members in the region.

28 It is not uncommon for Buddhist and other forms of meditation to be introduced as a neutral practice. It may be that the meditator can be introduced to other aspects associated with the practice at a later stage.

29 Interviews with Bob Mawson at Wat Phra Dhammakāya on 4.02.01 and at the Rama Gardens hotel on 20.02.01. Bob Mawson, however, was ordained as a Buddhist monk in 2002 for *phansa*.

30 In an interview at the temple with Ekchat Mankhong, an *ubasok* with special responsibility for foreign relations at Wat Phra Dhammakaya on 27.8.02.

31 The Buddhist apocalyptic legend of three periods of Buddhism. The first period is known as the 'Law Age' or *Sharma*, it lasted for 1,000 years from the death of Sakyamuni. During this time, monastic discipline was strictly observed and believers were deeply pious. The second period was known as the age of the 'Copied Law'. While morality declined during this period, piety was evidenced in the building of temples. The third age was known as the age of the 'Later Law' (*Mappō*) – a reign of vice and terror lasting for 10,000 years (Mackenzie, 1995b:3). The age of the 'Later Law' is seen to have commenced in AD 1050 (Yamamori, 1974:50).

32 It is understandable that members in the Japanese context do this as they are taught that 'faith that is not expressed in *shakubuku* is insufficient' and 'happiness is attainable only through the accumulation of merit by winning converts' (Yamamori, 1974:9).

33 On New Road, Bangkok, in February 2000.

34 These characteristics first appeared in M Marty and RS Applby (eds) 1991 *Fundamentalisms Observed*.

35 The *Maṅgala Sutta* and the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta* are two examples of this.

36 In an interview at Wat Phra Dhammakāya on 27.8.02.

37 Charles Keyes (1977:290) gives the example of a monk towards the end of the nineteenth century in South Thailand who had come to be recognised as a *phu mi bun*. The monk was urged by several men to flee to the hills along with the other villagers, as Chinese

tin miners were expected to attack the village. The monk (who was abbot of the local temple) refused to leave and the men stayed with him. The monk issued each man with a magical cloth (Thai *pha praciat*) – a white cloth with sacred writing on it. The Chinese attacked the village and were so surprised by the unexpected resistance that they ran away. Some villagers who had earlier run away returned to their village when they heard the news. The monk issued them with magical cloths to protect them. Shortly afterwards, a larger band of Chinese attacked but were again repelled. This story demonstrates how a monk with extraordinary powers became the deliverer not just of a few men, but a whole community. The community was in a social relationship of dependence on the monk, or, more accurately, the monk's merit, which could be transferred to the villagers and in this case led to deliverance from the common threat. The monk continued to produce various charms for protection after the crisis and his reputation grew as a result. The Siamese government skilfully prevented the monk's following becoming politically subversive by promoting him to a leadership position within the local *Saṅgha*. This, in effect, institutionalised the monk's influence and perceived power.

38 This would be done by disposing of their gold and silver, killing off buffalo and swine and collecting pebbles. Even a sexual element is added as women who are unmarried are urged to take a husband. Those who do not follow these prescriptions will suffer a horrible death – being eaten by giants (Keyes, 1977:297).

39 The English translation is 'Lord Golden Serenity'.

40 Luang Pū Thuat, a seventeenth century Supreme Patriarch of the *Saṅgha* during the Ayutthaya period. This monastic was famous for his supernatural powers. Pū too was a senior titled monk in the reigns of King Mongkut and his son King Chulalongkorn (the Bangkok period). King Mahābrahmā Jinnapañjara was a legendary follower of Moggallāna, a disciple of the Buddha. See Jackson, 1988b:142.

41 There is a very helpful overview of the development and activities of the CPT and the government's response in *Thailand: Economy and Politics*, chapter nine (Phongpaichit and Baker, 1997).

42 Kuan Im is the Thai rendering of Guan Yin, the Chinese name given to a female form of the ninth stage *Bodhisattva* Avalokiteśvara whose Sanskrit name means 'the Lord who looks down (with compassion)' (Harvey, 1990:131). In Thailand, Kuan Im is also referred to as 'the goddess dressed in white' and the 'blessed mother of mercy' (Jackson, 1999:268).

43 'Suchart's non-*Saṅgha* religion was supported by a faction of the establishment which had lost control of the political mechanisms of the state, including control over the *Saṅgha* and the official expression of Thai Buddhism' (Jackson, 1988b:164).

44 Phra Dhammachayo's life story is included in a Thai language Wat Phra Dhammakāya book celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the movement.

45 Both examples are typical of millenarianism in the Thai context, especially the winning over of a following to a leader by the demonstration of his miraculous power.

46 Dr Nok's comments, Edinburgh, 2000.

47 In an interview at Wat Phra Dhammakāya on 27.8.02.

48 In September and October 1998, many thousands of Wat Phra Dhammakāya members claim to have seen an image of Luang Phaw Sot in the middle of the sun (the colour was so soft and clear that it was possible to look at the sun). The image of the founder of the movement became so big that eventually the sun was a small crystal in his stomach (Daorueng, 1999:39). A former office bearer within the movement believed the alleged sighting could be explained by mass hypnosis. (I do not wish to disclose the identity of the person, the interview took place in Bangkok on 31.8.02.)

49 At www.dmc.tv one may access recorded programmes and live events at Wat Phra Dhammakāya. The temple has its own satellite TV programme.

50 This term is discussed at the beginning of the Chapter 4.

51 At a Wat Phra Dhammakāya meditation training session at the Rama Gardens hotel on 20 February 2000, Mrs Noi, a top-level manager of a large and prosperous company told me of the importance of finding a place which delivered suitable teaching for her two children. She felt that the temple provided a good service in this regard.
52 Mr Lek at Wat Phra Dhammakāya on 11.2.02.
53 This reason was suggested to me by a Wat Phra Dhammakāya member who at that time was a PhD student studying in Edinburgh.
54 An American monk in the Phra Buddhadāsa tradition.
55 Interview on 12.2.02.
56 Such as Amway, an American company who sell detergents and toiletries through sales teams. The principle is that management receive a percentage of the seller's sales. The higher the level of management (the more sales he/she is responsible for) the greater level of financial reward there is.
57 Interview at Wat Phra Dhammakāya on 2.8.02.
58 In an interview at Wat Phra Dhammakāya on 25.8.02.
59 The idea of *bun-niyom* is described in detail in the section on 'The Practice of Buddhist Economics' in chapter five of the thesis.
60 Pridi Phanomyong, one of the leaders of the group who established a Constitutional Monarchy in 1932, and prime minister in 1946 advocated a form of Buddhist socialism. Phiun Songkram, prime minister from 1938–44 and again from 1947–57, encouraged a form of economic nationalism which he justified vaguely in Buddhist terms. See footnote 106 of Keyes (1990:407).
61 There is also an interesting comparison between Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Christianity in the destruction of evil through spiritual conflict.
62 On the other hand, there is an increase in organisations such as Alcoholics Anonymous.
63 One Thai pharmacist told me how she wanted to come to the UK to undertake doctoral research. As she meditated, she felt sure she would be accepted for a particular university, and even had a picture of the kind of house she would live in. When she arrived to commence her research she was allocated a house exactly the same as the one she had visualised. This story illustrates the alleged efficacy of *Dhammakāya* meditation.
64 On a visit to Wat Phra Dhammakāya on 4.2.00.
65 Bob Mawson in a conversation at Wat Phra Dhammakāya on 11.2.00.
66 This term is discussed at the beginning of the Chapter 4.
67 Wallis cites the Church of Scientology, the Transcendental Meditation Movement, Sōka Gakkai and the Inner Peace Movement all as world-affirming.
68 For example, the '*nibbāna* is self' statement may be seen as an adaptation of the Christian view of the saved enjoying heaven.
69 In the section entitled 'The *Dhammakāya* meditative technique'.
70 In the section entitled 'The Yogāvacara tradition as a possible source of the *Dhammakāya* meditation technique'.
71 Normally there are 600 monks and up to 400 novices (not counting temporary ordinations during *phansa*) at the temple.
72 Quoting a comment made by Dr Feungfusakul who completed doctoral research into the movement in 1993.

4 THE APPROACH OF WAT PHRA DHAMMAKĀYA TO SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

1 *Sa-upādisesanibbāna*, also known as *kilesaparinibbāna* (Pāli). The concept here is that although the Five *Khandhas* or Aggregates (*rupā, vedanā, saññā, saṅkhāra* and *viññāṇa*) of the *Arahat* are still functioning, they are not 'on fire', as the fires of attachment, hatred and delusion are extinguished. Fire was a metaphor that the Buddha frequently used, normally with a negative association.

2 When the enlightened one (*Arahat*) dies he passes into *nibbāna* without substrate, this is known as *anupādisesa nibbāna* (Pāli). Not only are the fires extinguished, the *khandhas* no longer exist. The Buddha refused to describe the nature of the existence of an *Arahat* after death. While some form of existence is a possibility, how we may describe such an existence is impossible, as all normal terms of reference that we might use no longer apply to the *Arahat*. It would be wrong to say the enlightened one exists in *nibbāna*, and it would also be wrong to say he does not exist.

3 The demands of the Noble Eightfold Path necessary for enlightenment (described as *nibbānic* Buddhism) are considered excessively rigorous. The carrying out of meritorious deeds leading to a 'good' rebirth (*karmatic* Buddhism) is thus considered more appropriate by many Buddhists. These terms were coined by Melford Spiro on his reflection on Buddhism in post-war Burma [Myanmar] (Gethin, 1998:110).

4 The diameter of *āyatananibbāna* is said to be 141,330,000 *yote*, (Rachabandit, 1999:95). A *yote* is an ancient Thai measurement roughly equal to 10 miles.

5 It is noteworthy that the Wat Phra Dhammakāya movement has reinterpreted Buddhist beliefs in a cosmologicalway for well-educated, upwardly mobile Thai. Buddhadāsa's approach (to the same target group) was much more rational. What unifies these approaches is the desire to view these beliefs (e.g. *nibbāna*) as having relevance for everyone in the 'here and now'.

6 Ordinary beings are seen as streams of mental processes, with an 'external' world as a projection from their direct experience.

7 The Docetic Movement were those who understood that the humanity of Jesus Christ was an appearance or illusion. The term comes from the Greek *dokien* 'to appear', or 'to seem'. A typical Docetic view of Christ was he was revealed as a man, but it was not a 'Rear body'. The Apostles' and Nicene Creeds disagreed with the Docetic position. The Definition of Calcedon (451 CE) describes Christ as being 'truly God and truly man'.

8 The *Dharma* is communicated to the *Bodhisattvas* through the appearance and speech of the Enjoyment-body.

9 The meditator who wishes to create the *manomayakāya* needs to first achieve the fourth *jhāna* (meditative trance).

10 Namely: the eye socket, right if the meditator is male, left if female; the centre of the head; the palate; the throat aperture; the navel, the point where the breath is thought to end is the sixth position.

11 This is at the intersection of two lines, one running from two finger breadths above the navel to the back, the other running from one side to the other, at the same level. This is the centre of the body and the seventh position. 'This is the mind's permanent resting place. Whenever a person or any other creature is born, dies, sleeps or wakens, the *Dhamma* sphere which governs the body rises from this position' (Jayamanggalo, 1997:62). In this meditation process, the sphere appears to float up from the sixth to the seventh and final position. While visualising the inner body, the meditator is instructed to consider it to be an empty space, devoid of all organs but filled with happiness and joy.

12 The Pāli words are explained to mean 'the righteousness Absolute of Attainment which a human being can achieve' (Dhammakāya Foundation, 1990:8). Literally, 'the perfect *Arahat*'.

13 Wat Phra Dhammakāya define *paṭhama-magga* as 'the trailhead of the Path to *Nirvāṇa*, manifesting inwardly to meditators as a diamond-clear sphere when the mind comes to a standstill. Can be equated with the first *jhāna*' (Dhammakāya Foundation, 1998:147). Out with Dhammakāya meditation, the term *paṭhama-magga*, or 'first path', usually refers to the attainment of Stream entry.

14 This conversation took place on 17.2.01 at the Santi Asoke *putthasatan* in Bangkok. The *Dhammakāya* meditator was attending a special meeting on the nature of socially engaged Buddhism. You may wish to review the discussion on *pāramī* at the beginning of Chapter 3.

15 A Wat Phra Dhammakāya monk in London responding to my question on this matter indicated that this was impossible given the lack of contact between these two traditions when Luang Phaw Sot made the discovery in approximately 1915.

16 Phra Mettānando was a fairly young but senior monk at Wat Phra Dhammakāya when he made that suggestion. He has since left Wat Phra Dhammakāya due to his concerns regarding the abbot's financial practice. In 1999, at the University of Hamburg, Phra Mettānando completed a doctoral thesis entitled *Meditation and Healing in the Theravāda Buddhist Order of Thailand and Laos*.

17 The *maṇḍala* is a sacred circle representing a sacred realm. It often consists of concentric circles, enclosed by a square, all contained within a sacred circular boundary. The *maṇḍala* contains 'symbols and images that depict aspects of the enlightened psycho-physical personality of the Buddha and that indicate Buddhist themes and concepts' (Powers, 1995:227). The images used will depend on the special distinctives of the main deity whose 'land' is being typified. Helpful discussion of *maṇḍalas* are found in Powers, 1995:266–70 and Saunders, 1987:155–8.

18 The cosmic Buddhas are the *Saṃbhogakāya* Buddhas which appear in meditation. Thus the name of 'meditation Buddhas'. The names of these Buddhas are Vairocana, Akṣobhya, Ratnasambhava, Amitābha and Amoghasiddhi. These and the cosmic *Bodhisattvas* are part of the Buddhist Tantric system. Govinda (1969:111) points out that the Tibetan word *Iha* generally corresponds to the Indian word *deva* and is used of the cosmic Buddhas, as well as advanced *Bodhisattvas* such as Avalokiteshvara or Padmapāṇi, and Samantabhadra.

19 Phra Rajyanvisith is the abbot of Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāyaram, a temple located within the Dhammakāyaram Buddhist Meditation Institute at Damnoen Saduak, in the province of Rajburi, 94 kilometres south-west of Bangkok. After practising meditation since 1970 and co-founding the Dhammakāya Buddhist Meditation Institute, Phra Rajyanvisith ordained as a monk at Wat Paknam and published *The Heart of Dhammakaya Meditation* in 1991 under the name Phra Ajarn Mahā Sermchai Jayamanggalo. His current monastic name was bestowed on him in 2004 after having being known as Phra Bawana Visutikhun since 1998.

20 The *maṇḍala* is a sacred circle representing a sacred realm. It often consists of concentric circles, enclosed by a square, all contained within a sacred circular boundary. The *maṇḍala* contains 'symbols and images that depict aspects of the enlightened psycho-physical personality of the Buddha and that indicate Buddhist themes and concepts' (Powers, 1995:227). The images used will depend on the special distinctives of the main deity whose 'land' is being typified. Helpful discussion of *maṇḍalas* are found in Powers, 1995:266–70 and Saunders, 1987:155–8.

21 Field visit to the Samye Ling monastery, Eskadalemuir, in the Scottish Borders on 29.4.02.

22 The space may well represent the clarity and purity of the enlightened mind. See Harvey, 1990:135.

23 *Vajra* means 'diamond'. This symbolises the 'indestructible nature of the perfection of wisdom and compassion that characterises Buddhas. These form an indissoluble unity, which is able to destroy the bonds of ignorance and other afflictive emotions' (Powers, 1995:230).

24 That is the Buddha, *Dhamma* and the *Saṅgha*. Notice the use of *ratna* in the name of the *Dhyāni* Buddha Ratnasambhava. Ratnasambhava means 'the origin of the jewels'.

25 Drawing on ideas of Indian yoga, these sheathes are not separate layers but forms of energy. The outer (our physical body) is built up through nutrition. The next area is our ethereal, energy or *prānic* body nourished by our breath. The third sheath is our thought body, or personality which is formed by our thoughts. Fourth, there is the body of our potential consciousness. Ultimately there is body of the universal consciousness.

26 The Thammayut movement was also influential in Laos and Cambodia.

27 An interview conducted with a monk who had been at Wat Paknam for 26 'rains'.
28 As mentioned in the Chapter 3, Phra Mettānando (a former medical doctor) was a senior monk at Wat Phra Dhammakāya. He left the movement as a result of what he considered to be excessive pressure placed on members to donate to the temple. Phra Mettānando divulged information to Dr Apinya Feungfusakul regarding the belief within the temple that Phra Dhammachayo is an *Awatan* (Thai) or *Avatāra* (Pāli). His thesis is *Meditation and Healing in the Theravāda Buddhist Order of Thailand and Laos*, 1999, University of Hamburg.
29 The book is a collection of Yogāvacara texts copied from manuscripts by Phra Mahā Cai Yasōtharat (Crosby, 2000:186). It was published in 1935. The title is *A Book of Samatha and Vipassanā-kammathān of Four Eras*. Phra Mettānando's thesis focuses on the translation of texts from Phra Mahā Cai Yasōtharat's book which relate to healing through meditation.
30 This would appear to be the reproduction of various instructions made by Supreme Patriarch Phra Kai Thuean. Prior to becoming the Supreme Patriarch of the Thai *Saṅgha* Phra Kai Thuean was a forest-dwelling monk and meditation teacher. He passed away in 1822 at the age of 90.
31 This story was recounted to me by two leading Thai Buddhist scholars and a well-qualified monk who studied at Wat Mahāthat. I have chosen not to disclose their identity.
32 I have been shown a photocopied document from Wat Mahāthat which states that Luang Phaw Chadok went to Wat Paknam in February 1955 to assist Luang Phaw Sot assess his own prowess of meditation, using the *Dhammakāya* model. Apparently Luang Phaw Sot admitted that Luang Phaw Chadok (who used the *Vipassanā* approach) was the more skilled meditator.
33 Phra Mettānando discusses various healing practices which make use of the *cakras* in his doctoral thesis.
34 Work commenced on the building in 2004 to celebrate the 60th birthday of Phra Dhammachayo. This was his fifth, twelve-year cycle, and as such, considered to be a highly auspicious occasion.

5 THE HISTORY OF THE SANTI ASOKE MOVEMENT AND A DESCRIPTION OF ITS VARIOUS COMMUNITIES

1 The two Pāli words *Santi* (peace) *Asoka* (grief-less) are translated 'Peace without suffering'. Members often refer to themselves as Chao Asoke (the people of Asoke).
2 *Rak* is the Thai word for 'love' in the sense of a strong liking for a person or thing.
3 Bodhirak is understood by the Asoke community as meaning 'the true teacher of Buddhism'.
4 Dr Tavivat Puntarigvivat , Department of Humanities, Mahidol University, Bangkok. Interview at Mahidol University, 12.2.01.
5 *The 1962 Saṅgha Act* requires all religious centres to be registered with the Department of Religious Affairs.
6 A temple in the Mahānikai fraternity.
7 The *kutthi* (Pāli) *kut* (Thai) are shelters used for the monks and lay people and are 1.5 by 2.5 metres in length. This, according to the Asoke community is in complete compliance to the *vinaya*, and in contrast to the living quarters of some senior monks in the richer, Bangkok temples.
8 In 1980, the centre at Daen Asoke was transferred to a few kilometres outside the provincial capital town of Nakhon Pathom and renamed Pathom Asoke.
9 There were around 45 members (both lay and monastic) of the community at this time.

10 Bodhirak draws on the work of Buddhadāsa, an outstanding scholar monk who died in 1993. Buddhadāsa's concern was to impact the modern, well-educated Thai middle class with relevant Buddhist teaching. Although Buddhadāsa's *teaching* was controversial, he remained within the *Saṅgha* as his *practice* was not viewed as schismatic. Bodhirak has criticised Buddhadāsa for not applying his teaching to practice.

11 These centres are referred to as *putthasathan*, the Thai for the 'venue of the Buddha (Buddhism)'. This is considered to be a high word, more so than the term *wat* which is the normal Thai word used to denote a temple. Calling the centre a *putthasatan* marks it out from mainstream and stresses the independent nature of the movement.

12 A *klot* is a lightweight, one person brown tent/mosquito net normally used by forest monks.

13 *Dhamma-charik* is the Thai term for 'missionary-monks'.

14 Doing things in isolation is not a culturally accepted Thai approach to any activity. It is therefore little wonder that a reasonably large group proved to be successful, not just for those who participated but also in terms of impacting the communities visited.

15 The Santi Asoke approach to enlightenment is based on working hard with deep concentration. This distinctive will be examined later.

16 The book was published in Thai *Bodhirak – Saatsadaa Mahāpha*. This translates into English as 'Bodhirak – The Highly Dangerous Prophet' (Jackson, 1989:170). This book was published under the auspices of Anan's movement, the 'Organisation to Protect Buddhist Teachings of Thailand' (*Ongkaan Phithak Phutthasaat*). Apparently, three months, or so, prior to Anan's attack on Bodhirak, Anan published a book entitled *Kham Sawn Tithiyai* ('Heretical Teachings'). This book criticised the teachings of Buddhadasa.

17 One example of Phra Anan Chayananto's quest for orthodoxy can be seen when he urged police to take action against the Thammarangsri religious cult, a brand of the Huppasawan movement (discussed in Chapter 3) which the government ordered to close (*Bangkok Post*, 14.2.82). It is, however, interesting to note in the same article that Somporn Tepsittha, president of the Young Buddhists Association pointed out that Phra Anan was 'wrong for consecrating and distributing amulets, and that he had been warned about this activity'.

18 According to a *Bangkok Post* report around this period police agents were ordered to keep a close watch on Anan's movement to prevent possible violence against Santi Asoke.

19 These celebrations marked the founding of the Chakri Dynasty and two-hundredth anniversary of Bangkok being the capital of the kingdom. Sukhothai, Lan na, Ayutthaya and Thonburi are the previous dynasties and capitals of the kingdom.

20 For example, Article 44 of *The Saṅgha Act of 1962* states 'Whoever charges the order of the *Saṅgha* of Thailand with an accusation that could produce disgrace and discord shall be punished with a fine of not more than 5,000 Baht, or an imprisonment of not more than one year, or both.'

21 *Mahā* is the Pāli word for 'great'. It is the title bestowed upon monks who have passed the grade three Pāli examinations. It also has the nuance of being a holy person.

22 This umbrella association included the following groups, Dhamma Education, Celibacy Club, Vegetarian Club, Dhamma Pencraft Club, Coconut Shell Handicraft Club, and the Student Practitioners' Club (Feungfusakul, 1993:99). Members of these clubs were required to keep the Five Precepts.

23 Known as Ruam Phalang ('joining in the force'), this group was the forerunner of the Phalang Dhamma Party.

24 'He polled 480,000 votes, double that of his closest competitor' (*Asia Magazine*, 11.1.87).

25 Phalang Dhamma (Thai *Tham*) may be translated 'power of the *Dhamma*', or 'moral force'.

26 Chamlong, as governor of Bangkok, did not run for election.
27 Chamlong received the 'Man of the Year' award from the Personality Development Centre. He eventually agreed to accept it provided the venue was changed from the up-market Shangri-La Hotel! (*Bangkok Post*, 2.11.86).
28 This is a reference to the celibate lifestyle of Chamlong who keeps The Eight Precepts while married.
29 The leading Thammayut monastery where the Mahāmakut Buddhist University is also located.
30 Thai may be translated 'The Santi Asoke Case'.
31 'In October 1982 the then Director-General of the Department of Religious Affairs, Chamiyang Wutthijan, estimated that there were 3,500 unauthorised or unregistered monasteries and religious centres in the country' (Jackson, 1989:178). This had increased to 4,900 by October 1985 (Jackson, 1989:80). These monasteries are not critical of mainstream Buddhist practice or leadership. It should be pointed out that although *The 1962 Saṅgha Act* require all monasteries to register with the Department of Religious Affairs, there is no law which can enforce registration and the department have no power to close down unregistered monasteries.
32 The Thai *Saṅgha* wear saffron coloured robes, except for the forest tradition who wear brown robes. Bodhirak chose to wear a dark brown long-sleeved shirt and trousers, covered by a robe of similar colour. The title *phra* meaning 'venerable', was replaced by *Samaṇa*, a Pāli word meaning 'renunciate'. It should not be confused for *Samaṇaen* (Thai) for 'novice' (from the Pāli *samaṇera* meaning 'little *Samaṇac*').
33 The particular charge was an alleged violation of Article 27 of *The Saṅgha Act of 1962*. This is a refusal to defrock within seven days after having being ordered to do so by the Ecclesiastical Council. The charges which are criminal are subject to a maximum of six months in prison.
34 The pronoun used by a Thai monk when referring to himself.
35 Literally the 'Garden of Liberation'. This is the temple in South Thailand where the late Buddhadāsa (1906–93) established his centre of teaching and meditation.
36 Anan Senakhan tried to organise a large group of monks to protest at Chamlong's campaign to run for another term of office as governor of Bangkok, given his association with Santi Asoke.
37 See D McCargo, 1993:99 for a discussion of this issue.
38 Military propaganda, including carefully edited videos, presented the army as peace keepers and Chamlong and other demonstrators as antagonists.
39 National Peacekeeping Council; for details please refer to Phongpaichit and Baker, 1997, pp.355–7.
40 The previous year, Chamlong was awarded the Il-Ga (One Family) award. This award is given to honour those who sacrifice themselves for promoting the welfare of all mankind. The award (a medal and US$20,000) commemorates the life and work of the late Dr Kim Yong-Ki (from South Korea) for his intense pioneering spirit. Il-Ga was Dr Kim's 'pen name' (*Bangkok Post*, 18.9.91). Chamlong received the Roman Magsaysay award for government service in Manila in July 1992. The former Bangkok governor was cited for inspiring tens of thousands of Thai during the pro-democracy protests in May 1992. According to the *Bangkok Post* (21.7.92), the citation on the award read 'With a stunning act of non-violent protest that prompted his arrest, he galvanised the public to reject the unelected leader (General Suchinda Kraprayoon).' The Magsaysay awards are given in five categories annually to outstanding Asians or institutions in the regions. These awards were established in memory of former Philippine president Ramon Magsaysay who died in a plane crash in 1957.
41 While the protest may have become out of hand due to right wingers who wished to make trouble for Chamlong, it clearly illustrated the politician's lack of influence in

Bangkok. It should be born in mind that Chamlong was MP for Kanchanaburi, and so spent a lot of his time in this town – a four-hour drive from Bangkok.
42 There are a significant number of titles by Buddhadāsa (1906–93).
43 Appendix one.
44 Fah Apai (Thai) means 'forgiveness as vast as the heavens'.
45 Information gathered from Mr Lek on 17.9.05 at Santi Asoke.
46 I was involved in these programmes at Santi Asoke. The interviews (which were conducted in Thai) explored my reasons for visiting Thailand and my understanding of Santi Asoke.
47 Information given by the librarian at Santi Asoke on 1.9.05.
48 One *rai* is 0.4 of an acre.
49 Fukuoka is a Japanese ecologist whose book *The One Straw Revelation* outlines the benefits of mixing a variety of crops in a small area.
50 This information was gained from a discussion with Troy Santos who was experimenting with natural farming methods at Pathom Asoke where I met with him on 21.8.02.
51 This event commemorates the gathering of 1,250 *Arahats* to receive the *paṭmokkha* (227 rules or disciplines for monks). The meeting was not announced in advance but due to their enlightened state the *Arahats* allegedly knew that it was going to take place and attended.
52 In an interview on natural farming with the librarian at Santi Asoke in early March 2001, and Mr Lek on 31.8.02. Both interviews were carried out at Santi Asoke in Bangkok.
53 See Terwiel BJ, 1994 *Monks and Magic*, pp.65–9 for description of this ceremony.
54 The main sanctuary.
55 *Lokuttara* is the Thai and Pāli for 'supramundane, transcendental', or 'beyond these worlds'. The book was published by Fah Apai Press in 2000.
56 *Sikkhamat* is the Thai version of two Pāli words – *sikkhā* 'learn' and *mātā* 'mother', thus 'mother in training'. It is the Asoke term for a female renunciate. This issue is expanded on in the section of the status of women in Santi Asoke.
57 In an interview in Chiang Mai, 18.9.02. Dr Apinya Feungfusakul completed doctoral research on Santi Asoke and Wat Phra Dhammakāya in 1993.
58 *Chow* is the Thai for 'the people of', and 'Chow Asoke' is a common term used by Asoke people to refer to themselves.
59 *Sawadee* is the standard Thai greeting. The younger, or person with the lower social status will raise his/her hands, palms together, to the face while making the greeting. The older, or person from a higher social standing will then respond in a similar fashion.
60 The literal meaning is 'Rock, Sky and Water'. The idea is a place of natural elements.
61 *Lana* (literally 100,000 fields) is the name for the old Northern Kingdom of Siam.
62 This may be translated as 'rocks and water right up to the sky'.
63 A monk reckons his time in robes not in years but in *vassa* (Pāli) or *phansa* (Thai), the period of time when he is required to stay in his temple, or in Asoke terms *putthasathan*. The three-month rainy season ends on the full moon of the eleventh month (November).
64 According to Mr Lek, an engineer who has been involved in schooling and publishing at Santi Asoke for many years. An interview at Santi Asoke on 31.8.02.
65 The Thai name *mahālai* is similar to the term for university *mahāwitialai*. The idea created is that of a university of life.
66 This is a translation of the better sounding Thai phrase *sin din, ben ngan, chan wecha*.
67 This procedure is discussed fully in the section on Asoke spiritual development.
68 Literally 'wisdom certificate'. I understand that the course has now being recognised as being the equivalent of an undergraduate degree.

69 Some Asoke members go beyond the standard practise of one vegetarian meal per day and rising at 3 am to listen to the preaching of the *Dhamma*. They fast from food for extended periods, and wipe themselves down with a damp cloth instead of having a shower.
70 This differs from *chao-o-wat*, the mainstream term for ‘abbot’.
71 Bodhirak presides himself over the monthly meetings at Santi Asoke, Phatom Asoke and Ratchatani Asoke. These are the oldest and most developed centres. They have more members and projects which inevitably entail more problems to solve.
72 *Putthasatan* meaning a ‘station of the Buddha’.
73 In 2005 there were thirty-nine Asoke groups without resident *Samaṇa* and *sikkhamat*. These groups are made up of Asoke members who farm their own land and have invited other members to come and work with them.

6 THE DISTINCTIVES OF SANTI ASOKE AND AN ANALYSIS OF THE MOVEMENT

1 A Thai writer once told me ‘*Amnāt* is like soap, the more you use it, the sooner it is gone!’
2 This research was carried out at the *Puttha Pisek* retreat in February 2001 at Phai Sali, a four-hour drive north of Bangkok. Please refer to Appendix Two for the results and analysis. The raw data may be found in my PhD thesis *An Analysis of the Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke Movements and their Approaches to Spiritual Development* 2005, University of Sunderland.
3 *Khon dee u mi die, mi me cry chob*.
4 Gotama’s natural mother passed away shortly after his birth. His father married his first wife’s sister who brought up Gotama.
5 1) A nun must pay homage to a monk regardless of how much longer she has been ordained; 2) A nun must not spend the ‘rains’ in a residence where there is no monk; 3) Every half month a nun should ask the monks as to when the observance day is (Thai *wan phra*) and invite a monk(s) to give an exhortation on that occasion; 4) After the rains a nun must invite comments (feedback) from both Orders in respect of her behaviour and practice; 5) A nun offending against an important rule must undergo discipline for half a month before both Orders; 6) When as a probationer the woman has trained in the six rules for two years, she should seek ordination from both Orders; 7) A monk must not be abused or reviled in any way by a nun; 8) Admonition of monks by nuns is forbidden, admonition of nuns by monks is not forbidden (Cullavagga X: 354–5).
6 *Bhikkhunī* is the Pāli for a ‘female mendicant’.
7 Voramai Kabilsingh had been a schoolteacher prior to taking the Eight Precepts in 1956. She had been married to a politician and had a daughter who grew up to share her interests. Her daughter, Dr Chatsumarn Kabilsingh was a professor of religion and philosophy at Thammasat University prior to taking early retirement. She is active in trying to reinstate *bhikkhunī* ordination in the Theravāda tradition. In 1987, she co-founded Sākyadhitā ‘daughters of the Buddha’. This organisation comprises monastics, practitioners and scholars who work towards improving the lives of Buddhist women throughout the world. See Warner R and Gayley H, 1999 ‘Feminism and Buddhism in Thailand: The Spiritually-Based Social Action of Chatsumarn Kabilsingh’, pp.213–26. Several years ago, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh took full ordination in Sri Lanka as a *bhikkhunī*. She is now known as Dhammananda *Bhikkunī* and resides at Songdhamma Kalayāṇi Temple in Nakon Pathom, some 50 kilometres from Bangkok.
8 These are the abstention from the following: 1) taking or injuring life; 2) taking what is not given; 3) sexual activity; 4) false and slanderous speech; 5) using intoxicants;

6) bodily adornments; 7) eating solids after noon; 8) watching plays and dancing; 9) handling money; 10) sleeping on a high [soft or comfortable] bed.

9 An interview conducted at Santi Asoke in early March 2001.

10 The *dasa sil matavo* means 'Ten-Precept women', of whom there are more than 2,000 in Sri Lanka. Current *dasa sil matavo* are not held in such high esteem as the forerunners of the movement, many of whom came from affluent families. The movement came into being at the end of the nineteenth century partly to resist the domination of Buddhism by Christianity. The combination of saffron and white colours in their dress code symbolise a middle path between being a fully ordained monastic and an ordinary layperson (Barnes, 1996:262–5). Apparently they now have *bhikkunī* ordination in Sri Lanka and Chatsumarn Kabilsingh recently ordained as one.

11 Please refer to the note on The Ten Precepts. In reality, temple dwellers lie on a mat thus fulfilling the Tenth Precept. The Ninth Precept – abstaining from handling money is the real difference between the Eight and Ten Precepts. If all temple dwellers refused to handle money then the work of the temple would be severely restricted.

12 *Puñña-niyāma* meaning 'the order/law of *kammic* fruitfulness'. *Kammic* (Pāli) *Karmic* (Sanskrit).

13 For an in-depth description of *bun-niyom* see Heikkilä-Horn, 1997:122.

14 (Tr.) FL Woodward 1972.

15 Also known as Phra Dhammapiṭaka and Phra Payutto.

16 *Sikkhamat* Chinda in an interview conducted at Santi Asoke on 20.8.99.

17 Non-allowable meat for monks are the flesh of elephant or horse (they are regarded as royal emblems), snake and dog – flesh are viewed as unclean, and hunting animals, that is, lions, tigers, panthers, bears and hyenas as other such animals would smell the eaters and attack them (Harvey, 2000:159).

18 Interview with Troy Santos at Pathom Asoke on 20.8.02.

19 Kuan Im is the Thai rendering of Guan Yin, the Chinese name given to a female form of the Mahāyāna ninth stage *Bodhisattva* Avalokiteśvara.

20 Mr Anurak, at Pattalung, South Thailand on 29.8.02.

21 In a telephone conversation with Mr Lal, an Ambedkarite Buddhist from Birmingham on 7.10.03.

22 Mr Anurak, at Pattalung, South Thailand on 29.8.02.

23 According to some Asoke members, one possible translation of Bodhirak ('enlightenment-protector') is 'true teacher'.

24 This emerged in conversations with Asoke members, for example, Ms Fang Fon, a teacher, and also an interview with Bodhirak on 24.8.02, at Santi Asoke.

25 Most Asokans dislike city living, yet they maintain a strong presence in Bangkok as they believe capital-dwellers must first change as they are trend setters for the rest of the nation. Another reason for a Bangkok presence is the Thai believe every significant movement must have a presence in the nation's capital.

26 Mrs Moo is a married, middle-aged Thai who helps out at Santi Asoke. Interview at Santi Asoke on 31.8.02.

27 Mr Lek, an engineer in his fifties has spent 20 years in America. Prior to going to the US, he headed up Fah Apai, the Santi Asoke publishing house. He now looks after his ageing mother, and washes dishes in the vegetarian restaurant at Santi Asoke. Interview at Santi Asoke on 3.9.02.

28 It is estimated that there are around 10,000 base communities in Brazil, with a total membership of 250,000. It should be pointed out that base communities do not represent the poorest of the poor in society, as their practice requires a certain level of literacy.

29 Liberation theology starts with the basic questions of oppression, violence and marginalisation and focuses on practical solutions which result in liberation. Unlike

conventional approaches to theology, which conclude with an explanation of and possibly a reflection on issues, liberation theology seeks to be part of the process through which situations are resolved. Just as conventional theology borrows concepts from Plato and Aristotle, so liberation theology draws from Marxist understanding in terms of class struggle, the oppressive nature of capitalism and the need for revolutionary struggle. Salvation will include political freedom and a quality of life. Liberation theologians reject a spiritualising of the bible and view God as a liberator, the key example being the exodus of the Jews from oppression in Egypt.

30 There are also Christian *ashrams*. The first Protestant ashram was started in 1917 at Satara, India. It was started by N.V. Tilak, a National Christian leader who tried to contextualise Christianity to the Indian situation. Others Ashrams followed, both Protestant (1921) and Catholic (1941). The eating of vegetarian food, celibacy and long hours of work and religious practice are distinctive features of *ashram* living.

31 Dr Puntarigvivat deliberately refrains from defining the term *base community* in the hope that his readership might arrive at their own definition of the term through examining the activities of these communities. However, he gives the following examples of what he describes as Buddhist *base communities*: Phra Khamkhian Suvanno's community in north-eastern Chaiybhum; Phrakhun Sakorn's community in Yokkrabat (central Thailand) and the Buddha-Kasetra community in northern Thailand.

32 For example, the *Decalogue*, 'Sermon on the Mount' and St Paul's ethical teaching.

33 Prawet Wasi was born in Kanchanaburi (Central Thailand) and brought up in a family of merchants. He studied medicine, gaining a PhD in Haematology from the University of Colorado, and became a professor in the Faculty of Medicine at Sirirat Hospital in Bangkok. In 1981 he was awarded a Magsaysay award for his contribution to the work of NGOs.

34 It seems appropriate at this stage to give some background to the *Saṅ*gha's involvement in rural community work. The two Bangkok Buddhist universities for monks, Mahachulalongkorn (Mahānikai) and Mahamakut (Thammayut) created programmes in 1963 to train monks in developing rural communities. According to Suksamran (1976:63), the three main objectives of this mission were: First, to maintain and promote the monks' status as refuge of the people by providing them religious education and general knowledge concerning community development. Second, to encourage monks to participate in community development and thus help existing community development programmes to achieve their aims. Third, to promote unity among the Thai people and thus help promote national and religious security. Two groups (or orders) of monks were established as part of this initiative. First, the Phra Thammathut group (*thut* is the Thai word for 'ambassador, or envoy'). There were around 1,300 such monks in 1967, and their focus was to strengthen the Buddhist beliefs of the villagers and provide some aid to those in need. Second, the Phra Thammacharik group. These monks worked among the tribes in North Thailand and tried to convert them from their Primal Religion to Buddhism. This was to assimilate them into Thai society and minimise communist growth in the northern region.

35 The key section of the speech includes the following:

> Being a tiger is not important. What is important is to have enough to eat and to live; and to have an economy which provides enough to eat and live. Having enough to eat and live means supporting oneself to have enough for oneself. I have said before that this sufficiency does not mean that each household has to produce its own food, weave its own cloth. That is too much. But within a village or district, there must be a certain amount of self-sufficiency.
>
> (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2000:193)

36 This practice has been discontinued at all but one of the Asoke communities. It was felt that it was impractical due to all the work that needed to be done in the fields and small

factories. Lana Asoke maintains the practice of not talking on Wednesdays. This is partly a discipline for the junior monks in the first five years of their training. One monk in inviting me to visit joked 'don't come on Wednesdays because we won't speak to you'. (The word 'Wednesday' and 'speak' sound the same in Thai, thus '*wan put mi poot*'.)

37 The term was coined by Thomas More (1478–1535) MP and chancellor who published *Utopia* in 1516. More's substantially urbanised island utopia is noted for its religious tolerance and kind priests who seek to enlighten the few who hold to the forbidden views that the soul is mortal, that the world came about by chance and that there is no reward or punishment after death. More's book 'inaugurated a long tradition of fiction – a genre that reached a wider audience than polemical tracts, and being classed as fantasy, avoided political censure' (Rohmann, 2000:417). Utopians' confidence in the ability of mankind to live in harmony, and positive regard for uniformity and conformity has caused some writers to point out the dangers of such an approach, terming it *dystopia* (Greek word for a 'bad place'). Such *dystopian* writers include Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, George Orwell's *1984* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (Rohmann, 2000:418).

38 *Mu klum* (Thai) means 'the view of the group'. The general consensus of the group is considered important and a corrective to headstrong individuals.

39 *Sikkhamat* Rinpha in an interview conducted at Phathom Asoke on 10.2.00.

40 The booklet is available on the bookstands for non-temple dwellers to purchase and use.

41 Mr Anurak Poonnoo was a member of Santi Asoke for approximately seven years before leaving in the early 1990s. The interview was conducted in Pattalung, South Thailand on 29.8.02.

42 That said, there is a strong focus on retaining the young who have grown up within the movement. This is partly achieved by offering them positions of responsibility at an early age.

43 This was discussed in the section entitled Santi Asoke – a utopian society reminiscent of a previous generation?

44 In an interview on 24.8.02, at Santi Asoke, Bodhirak indicated that it will take 500 years of Asoke example before governance will be informed by *Dhamma* principles.

45 ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness), are also referred to as the Hare Krishna Movement. Members of the Unification Church are often referred to as 'Moonies'. The Family used to be known as 'The Children of God'.

46 While there are very few Mahāyāna temples in Thailand, there are shrines in most communities where there are Chinese families. Such families would also have shrines in their homes. Thus Chinese Mahāyāna traditions are maintained within Theravāda Buddhism.

47 Men and women are segregated and food is passed along two rows of people facing each other.

48 In an interview at Santi Asoke on 2.9.05.

49 Personal email correspondence in 2000.

7 THE APPROACH OF SANTI ASOKE TO SPIRITUAL PURIFICATION

1 At the end of my time at an Asoke retreat in Phai Sali in February 2002, I was interviewed by three monks for an Asoke magazine. They were keen to evaluate my understanding of Buddhism, and particularly my view of how Asoke differs from the teachings of Buddhadāsa. They summed up their understanding of the difference as follows: 'Buddhadāsa talks about doctrine, we put it into practice.' This, however, is not unrelated to the difference between remaining as a respected member of the *Saṅgha* like Buddhadāsa, and being excommunicated like Bodhirak!

2 Translated from a quote originally in French from a book written by Sikkhamat Thipdevi and Aporn Poompanna.

3 Pages 11–20 of *Tawt Rahat* (Thai) which is best translated by the English term 'password'.
4 Stream-enterer, Once-returner, Non-returner and *Arahat*.
5 Mrs Rhys-Davies and Christmas Humphries are two Western Buddhists who have been accused of this.
6 Interview with a newly ordained *samaṇa* on 19.8.02 at Pathom Asoke.
7 Asoke members refer to this as '*jay toh samatha*'.
8 It is not uncommon for newly ordained monks to be brought by their mentor to view, touch and in some cases spend time meditating on a corpse as it awaits cremation in the temple grounds. The monks will be reminded that their body is of the same nature and that they too will die.
9 The corpse of the lady who became a *sikkhamat* and donated a considerable amount of land on which Santi Asoke (Bangkok) is located and may be viewed in the *putthasathan* at Santi Asoke.
10 The practice of morality, concentration/mental development and wisdom. These three practices constitute The Noble Eightfold Path or *Ariya-Aṭṭhaṅgika-Magga*. This is referred to in Thai as *Ma ong phet*.
11 Traditionally seen as the four *jhānas* of *samatha* meditation, and these are the basis of *vipassanā*.
12 Right Insight and Right Deliverance being the last core-constituents (and part of the training in Higher Mentality).
13 If a mind at any moment is free (voided) from greed, hatred, delusion and the notion of self it may be considered as *free mind* or *chit-waang* (Buddhadasa *Bhikkhu*, 1988:35).
14 The abbot of Wat Luang Phaw Sot Dhammakāyaram. I was able to interview him at his temple on 12.3.01 at Ratburi, 90 kilometres south of Bangkok.
15 There are three *types* of wisdom – wisdom resulting from study, wisdom resulting from reflection and wisdom resulting from spiritual development. There are three *levels* of wisdom – Primary wisdom, which was taught before the Buddha's enlightenment. This level of wisdom is concerned with relative truth as opposed to absolute truth. The second level is the wisdom that comes from the Four Noble Truths, and is referred to as Noble Truth (*Ariya-Sacca*). This level of wisdom was achieved by Gotama the Bodhisatva, upon achieving Buddhahood. As the Four Noble Truths are understood, and the Noble Eightfold Path, *Ariya-Magga* followed, this second or intermediate level of wisdom is realised. The third and ultimate level of wisdom is the wisdom which comes from understanding the Law of Dependent Origination *Paticca-Samuppāda*. This level was also realised by Gotama on achieving Buddhahood. It includes insight into the true nature of existence (impermanence, suffering and non-self) and achieving the original purity of the mind (free from pollutants and suffering). There is also the ability, at this level, to detach from any feeling that arises. The second level is achieved and sustained by the following of the Noble Eightfold Path. Those who have achieved the highest level need no longer practise anything as they have moved beyond attachment and desire (Varadhammo, 1996:133–5).
16 This appears very close to the Six Bad Habits of the *Sīgalouāda Sutta* (Thai *Abayamuk*, Pāli *Apāyamukha*). These habits led to ruin and are as follows: being lazy, gambling, watching entertainment, going out late at night, being friendly with bad people and addictive behaviour. Indeed, it may well be that it is the Six Bad Habits which is being referred to, as they feature in the questionnaire.
17 Sāriputta was one of the main disciples of the Buddha who gained the *Dhamma* vision not long after the Buddha commenced his itinerant teaching. Sāriputta was famous for his wisdom and is often depicted in Buddhist art/iconography as standing on one side of the Buddha, while Moggallāna, another leading disciple (famous for his psychic powers) stands on the other side. Both Sāriputta and Mogallāna were *Arahats*.

In Theravāda Buddhism *Arahats* are not reborn; therefore Bodhirak is making an unorthodox statement.

18 This was the view of a senior female member of the Santi Asoke community in Bangkok (Interview 14.3.00) and is representative of the Asoke membership.

19 Mr Anurak in an interview at Pattalung on 29.8.02.

CONCLUSION

1 In the Thai language '108' (*roi phet*) conveys the impression of a large number, too many to mention. As already mentioned, the number '108' is also considered an auspicious number in Buddhism, for example, Buddhist rosaries sometimes have 108 beads.

2 In having nine communities throughout the country (eight of them outside the capital) Santi Asoke appears less threatening to the *Saṅgha* than if it had a large centre in Bangkok.

3 The belief is that Phra Dhammachayo is an *Avatāra* (a descent into this world) of one of the original leaders of the White *Dhammakāya*, a group of enlightened beings who created a perfect world which was spoiled by the Black *Dhammakāya*. Other members consider their leader to be 'messiah and a reincarnation of the Buddha' (*Bangkok Post*, 21.12.98).

4 Examples of this are the opposites of the Black and White Parties, and those who have a measure of insight through the practice of *Dhammakāya* meditation, as opposed to those who remain deluded due to their non-participation in this kind of meditation.

5 An example of this would be the ceremony on the first Sunday of each month when Phra Dhammachayo allegedly presents offerings to the Buddhas in *nibbāna*.

6 The publicity suggesting a donation of 5,000 Baht (£80) towards the purchase and fitting of a square metre of granite around the *cetiya*. No mention was made of specific rewards, although any Buddhist would expect such meritorious giving to generate merit (Palī *puñña*). As a reminder of their generosity, donors were to have their thumbprints set into a slab of granite.

7 The *ashram* is a community where the religious life is practiced. The eating of vegetarian food, celibacy and long hours of work and religious practice are distinctives of *ashram* living.

8 Nomian from the Greek *nomos* meaning 'law'.

9 These are: readily understood teaching: prosperity now; excellent publicity; building national significance through global expansion; sense of belonging; recruitment to the movement and fund raising.

10 The *ranat* is a Thai traditional instrument similar to a wooden xylophone.

APPENDIX ONE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1 I understand the terms *emic* and *etic* were first used in 1967 by Kenneth Pike to make the inside/outside distinction.

2 In an interview at New College, University of Edinburgh on 25.4.03.

3 This was due to the intense media coverage they were subjected to at that particular time and understandable reservations towards those who asked questions which flagged up their differences from mainstream Thai Buddhism.

4 Cox cites the categories of myths, rituals, sacred practitioners, scripture, art, morality, beliefs and rituals (Cox, 1992:31).

5 *Stage seven* Constructing the paradigmatic model. *Stage eight* Performing the *eidetic* intuition (arriving at a substantive definition of the movement being studied). *Stage nine* Testing the intuition (in the light of the observed phenomena).

6 For example, Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn suggests that Santi Asoke may be viewed as a millenarian movement. Donald Swearer understands Wat Phra Dhammakāya as seeking to create the old galactic system. That is, the grouping of society around a temple where power is located and used for managing all within the system.
7 A nomian movement elevates 'law' or 'rules' to a high level and views 'rule-keeping' as the litmus test of achievement/orthodoxy. From the Greek *nomos* meaning *law*.
8 The 'conversionist' is concerned to be 'saved'. The 'revolutionist' tries to overthrow the world. 'Introversionists' withdraw from the world. The 'manipulationist' helps members of his/her group rise above the world. The 'thaumaturgical' believes it possible to experience the supernatural in everyday life. 'Reformists' try to gradually change the world, while 'utopians' attempt to create a perfect society on earth.

APPENDIX TWO: ANALYSIS OF THE SANTI ASOKE QUESTIONNAIRE

1 If each of the 62 responders fully completed this section where they were invited to itemise five practices there would have been a total of 310 responses. Some, (particularly new members) mentioned less than five practices.
2 The Six Bad Habits (Thai *Abayamuk*, Pāli *Apāyamukha*) that lead to ruin are: being lazy; gambling; watching entertainment; going out late at night; being friendly with bad people and addictive behaviour.
3 In some cases Bodhirak was mentioned along with other Santi Asoke monastics.

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